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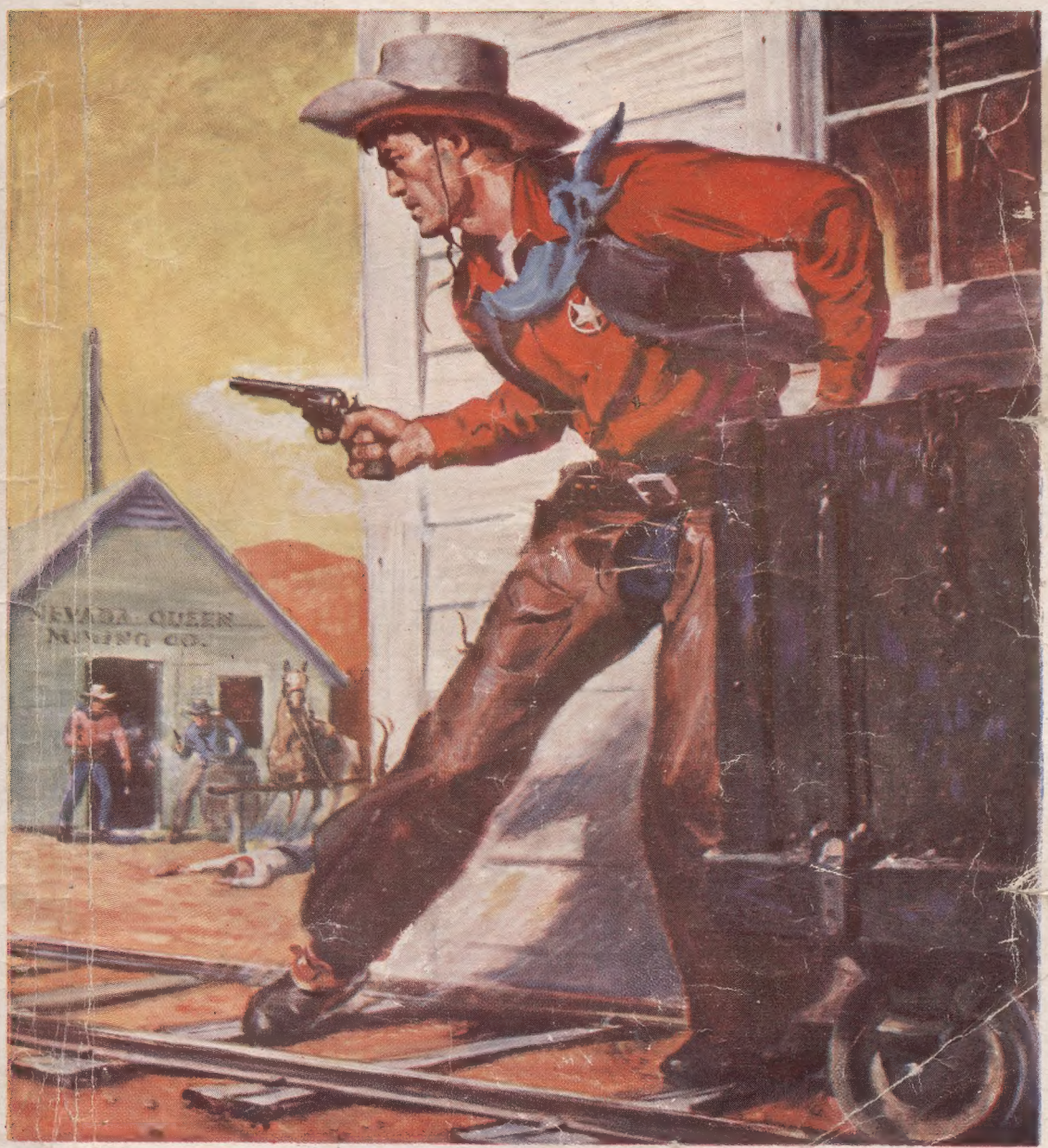

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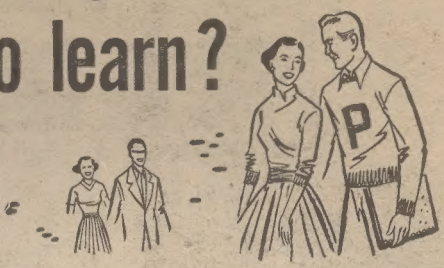

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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 54, No. 3 MAY, 1954

A Complete Jim Hatfield Novel

NEVADA QUEEN.....Jackson Cole 8
Here was a gang of killers the Lone Wolf would have chased to hell and back again—and very nearly does

Two Novelets

NOT ONLY THE DARK SCALPS.....W. J. Reynolds 52
The woman would likely get them both scalped, Clay Drumm thought, but without him she was sure to die

SIXGUN HOMESTEAD.....Dick Edstrom 72
The homesteader's wife puzzled him, but he had a job to do, proving it took more than a gun to make a man

Four Short Stories

LONG TRAIL HOME.....Pete Curtis 66
The kid brought trouble, bad trouble, to the outlaw

THE NEAR-SIGHTED KILLER.....Frank Scott York 87
Hawkeye couldn't tell a bandit from a barber pole

MAN ON THE RUN.....Philip Morgan 95
Larkin knew that the sheriff was hot on his trail

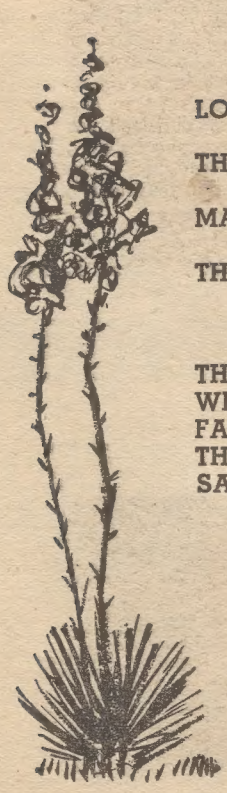
THE PLAY'S THE THING.....Ben Frank 102
As an actor Boo Boo Bounce made a passable lawman

Features

THE FRONTIER POST.....Captain Starr 6
WESTERNETTES.....Harold Helfer 51
FANTASTIC FLOATER.....Murray T. Pringle 69
THE PROMONTORY BENDER.....Robert Stephens 77
SAGEBRUSH SAVVY.....S. Omar Barker 114

Also See Tall Texas Tales on Pages 25 and 39
and Cartoons on Pages 29 and 47

JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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From Smoothbore to Space Gun

A WESTERN old-timer on his 90th birthday was asked, "You've seen a lot of changes in your time, haven't you?"

"You bet I have," he replied, "and I've been plumb agin most all of 'em!"

One of the exceptions no doubt was the gradual improvement in firearms since early frontier days. There was a time when a new and better rifle was almost as important to national security as atomic weapons are nowadays.

The greatest stride came with the development of the Kentucky rifle. It played a part in winning the Revolutionary War.

Up until that time smoothbore muskets were universal military and sporting weapons. The British redcoats carried muskets. Not until such frontier fighters as Morgan's Men entered the struggle for independence was the world at large aware of the superiority of the rifled gun, which shot farther, more accurately and with greater penetration.

Greased Patches

The so-called Kentucky rifle was made in Kentucky by skilled German gunsmiths. The first model was a flintlock, of course, with a long, unwieldy barrel and a stock that reached to the muzzle. It fired a much smaller ball than the smoothbores, but to reload was a slow, clumsy job. Because the ball had to be pounded home with a hammer, to accept the rifling.

Later, balls smaller than the bore were wrapped in greased patches that were easy to ram down the long barrel.

A soldier or hunter could carry one hundred or more of the smaller balls and thus stay in the field a long time. That made the improved Kentucky rifle the ideal frontiersman's gun. The bore was about .45 caliber. The smoothbore muskets were .60 caliber and upwards.

About 1800 percussion-fired rifles replaced the flintlocks and again were used against the British—this time in the War of 1812.

The next important modification of the famous Kentucky rifle came with our westward expansion. The original design was cumbersome to carry or use on horseback. So a straighter stock was made, also a shorter, lighter barrel.

This was known as the plains rifle, most of them being made in St. Louis by expert craftsmen who often "tailored" them to fit the individual, like a suit of clothes.

These guns were in use until after the Civil War. They were accurate enough to bunch shots in a target the size of a man's hand up to 200 yards.

Came the Colt

With the coming of the percussion lock, hand guns came into popularity. Colt was the pioneer in this field, though not the originator. Colt was the Henry Ford of the gun trade. He introduced modern manufacturing methods and interchangeable parts.

Colt's first model to go into general use was the Walker pistol, used in the Mexican War. The Remington cap-and-ball pistol was a competitor. With the coming of the revolver, a man often carried a handful of loaded Remington cylinders, which were removeable. This was before the metallic cartridge casting, which came next.

The Spencer carbine is said to be the first repeating rifle to use this new ammunition. Then the Henry model Winchester, followed by the Winchester .44-40.

The .44-40 was the gun of its day, as the .38-55 came to be in 1873 and the .30-30 in the 1890's. The .44-40 was popular because the cartridge also fitted a Colt revolver in use at that time. They were rim-

(Continued on page 113)

man against man-killer!

The giant tiger struck in the dark without warning . . . his hungry jaws meant blood and terror to the Indian village . . . until twenty corpses marked the jungle trail.

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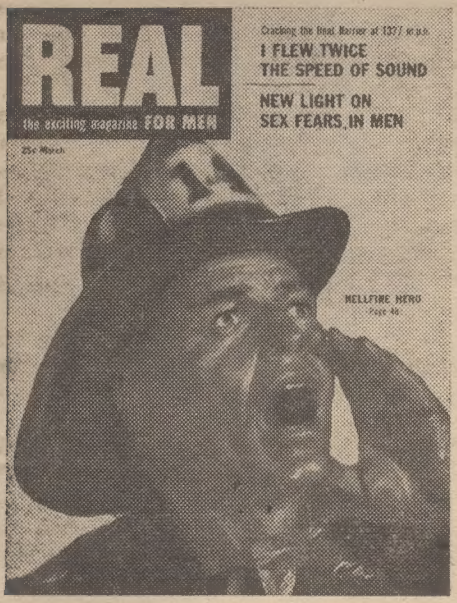

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Nevada Queen

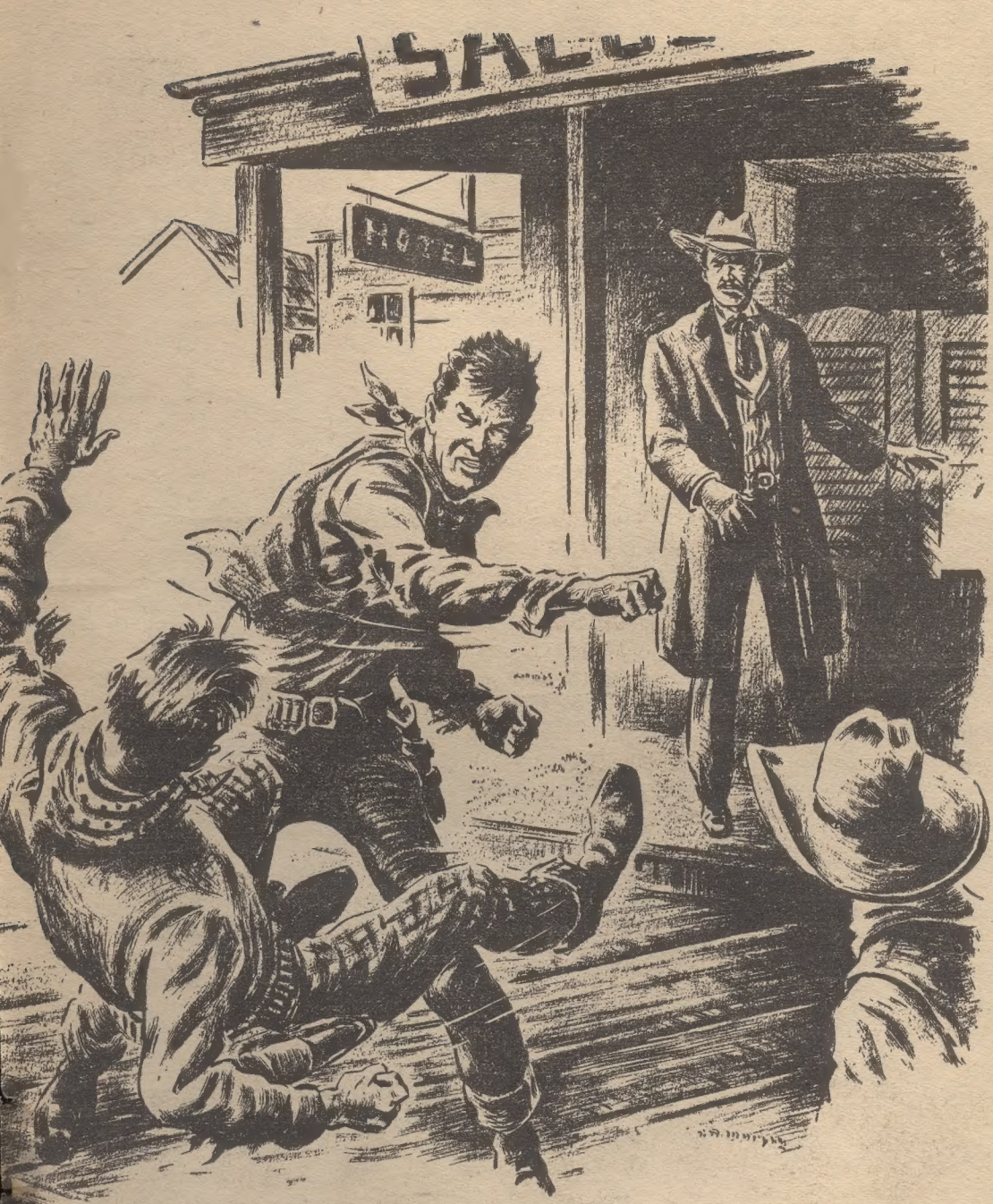
A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

Close-knit Trio

FAR from his native Texas, the big, raw-boned man on the golden sorrel pushed north toward the mining camp of Eldorado, in the heart of the gold-and-silver fields of Nevada. The pride of the Texas Rangers, Jim Hatfield, was on a typical mission for the lawman whom old Ranger Captain Bill McDowell had long ago dubbed the Lone Wolf. McDowell could spare but one man for such a far-flung and long-time project, so he sent the best he had.

As Hatfield rode across desert and mountain terrain, he was contemplating the problems involved in this solitary quest. They couldn't have been much more difficult. Four of



Here was a gang of back-shooting killers the Lone Wolf would have chased to hell and back—and very nearly does

the worst killers, thieves and spoilers ever to escape unhung from Texas had been reported operating up in Eldorado. Hatfield was supposed to arrest them and deliver them back in Austin for trial.

A nice proposition to tackle single-handed. The outlaws had adopted a guise of respectability, it was said, and there would be no help from the local authorities. But the Rangers wanted those four badmen, alive if possible. Their continued freedom and success was a blot on the fine record of the Texas law-enforcing organization.

Their names were burned deep in Hatfield's mind—Clay Loftin, the thinker and planner, Gila Glorney, strong-armed giant, Perry Emmons, slick little gambler and gunman, and Deuce Scalzi, a tough, ruthless killer. Their names, and their multitude of crimes against the sovereign state which Hatfield served.

Fresh tracks cut into the trail the Ranger was following. Two horsemen leading a pair of pack animals, he read from the sign. They weren't far ahead, and Hatfield let his great sorrel stallion, Goldy, out a bit to close up on them—maybe a couple of prospectors. Something worthwhile might be learned from them about the situation in Eldorada. And Jim Hatfield had ridden alone long enough now to welcome company.

The shadows were lengthening as the sun lowered toward the western mountains, and the air was cool and clean in these upland forests.

Hatfield was instinctively wary of ambush, as always, although there seemed no reason for one here. When one did come, it came as a surprise. The men ahead had doubled back on either flank, moving with silent skill in the woods, and Hatfield was caught in the middle when they challenged him.

"We're getting lazy and careless, Goldy," he muttered disgustedly, then raised his voice, along with his hands.

"What's the idea, boys? You're not so friendly in this country."

The answer was terse.

"Can't afford to be, mister."

A GNARLED gray stump of a man stepped out of the brush on the right, rifle ready, while a lanky, smooth-faced lad appeared at the left with his carbine lined on the Ranger.

"Holdup men are thicker'n fleas on an Injun dog in these parts," the old-timer grumbled on. "And you look gunhung and mean enough to be one of them buzzards."

"I'm not," Hatfield said, with an easy, pleasant laugh. "I'm just a peaceful pilgrim up from the south."

"Heading for Eldorado to make a big hit and get rich quick?" the old man said, with bitter satire. "Well, get down, and lead that horse along. We're making camp up ahead, and we'll look you over there. Don't get any notions about grabbing for them guns, neither."

Hatfield swung down and led Goldy up the trail, the men with the rifles behind him on either side. He could read character, and he wasn't worried about these two. They were prospectors all right, as he had anticipated, and good, honest men, in his quick but careful estimation.

"He don't look so bad up close, Dad," said the young fellow.

"Maybe not, Colly, but we ain't taking no chances. Life's too cheap hereabouts, when they'll kill a man for a pouch of tobacco, to say nothing of gold dust. Got to be on your guard, even if you ain't struck it rich."

"You haven't been lucky?" inquired Hatfield.

The man called Dad snorted. "Only one real lucky man around here. Name of Clay Loftin, smooth as silk, pretty as a play actor. Won the Queen High off poor old Bob Hickey, richest silver mine in the field, and now he's taken over most of the others. A big auger if there ever was one, and for my money he's crookeder than a dog's hind leg. But he's sure running the works in the Hill and Mineral Creek. You can't buck that much wealth and power. Them that try wind up real dead and awful sudden. The graveyard's full of 'em and growing steady."

"Who's this Loftin got working for

him?" Hatfield asked.

Dad snorted and spat. "More scum, riffraff, and rabble than anybody knows of. A sly little weasel named Emmons runs the Silver Palace and other joints for him, and a hulking brute called Glorney runs his stampmills. A gunfighter by the name of Scalzi keeps the big mines going, and there's a bunch more of 'em. Any man you bump into's liable to be a Loftin man. That's why we was leery of you."

JIM HATFIELD AND GOLDY

"Well I'm innocent and friendly—even if I don't look it," Hatfield said, and gave them his name as Jimson.

Even this far away from home it wasn't good policy to give out his right name, for the fame of Ranger Hatfield had spread throughout the vast West. Not everyone knew it, of course, but almost everywhere there was somebody who did.

"I'm Dubiel," said the veteran. "And my young pardner's Buck Collander. Reckon maybe we made a mistake in you, Jimson, but we'll keep an eye on you yet awhile."

"Sure, I don't mind," Hatfield said. "Just extra work for you, that's all. All I want is to try my luck in the Gulch of Mineral Creek I've heard so much about."

"It ain't so good no more," Dad Dubiel admitted. "You either work in the mines for Loftin, or you stake a miserable little claim and pan or dig your head off for a fair day's pay in dust."

"Any law in Eldorado?" asked the Lone Wolf.

"Nothing but the Vigilantes, and Loftin runs them along with everything else. He's slick-talked a lot of folks into thinking he's a real noble character and them that don't respect him are scared sick of him. Clay Loftin's got that town wrapped up tighter'n a miser's wallet, son."

They had picked a good camp site, near a small creek in a sheltered grassy glade. The two prospectors watched Hatfield unsaddle and rub down his big sorrel stallion, liking the way he handled the horse and himself.

YOUNG COLLANDER whispered, "I ain't holding a gun on him no more, Dad. Got an idea he could've turned the tables on us any time he wanted to anyway. Looks like a real big gunfighter to me, lighting a shuck from somewhere, but a nice easy-going, good-hearted gent—till he's crossed."

"Reckon maybe you're right, for once," mumbled Dad Dubiel. "Good man to have on our side, that's for sure, Colly. Can't help liking the great big cuss, and you know right well he's left a name and a rep somewhere's on the back-trail. But that's his business. You take a man at face-value in this country, and you don't ask no questions. He could be a lawman or an outlaw. There's good and bad on both sides. He ain't no common ordinary drifter, not with that eagle look and sure, easy way, them guns and that purely beautiful stud he's riding."

Hatfield helped cool off, rub down, water and stake out the stock, set up camp, start the fire, and prepare an eve-

ning meal, contributing freely from his own saddlebags. By the time supper was finished, they were on a friendly, agreeable basis, and Hatfield was learning a lot more about the mining community of Eldorado.

Old Dubiel was well-informed, and he appreciated an alert, intelligent listener. Young Collander chipped in with a few interesting items, but spent most of his time listening to Dad, and watching Jim Hatfield in the firelight.

There was something akin to hero-worship in the young fellow's eyes. Dubiel was old and wise beyond that, but a certain appreciation showed through his bluff manner. Hatfield felt pleased to find himself gaining two new friends and the liking was mutual.

Puffing on his pipe, Dad Dubiel declared "Follow the bonanza trail, you're a king today and a tramp tomorrow. I never struck it big myself, but I been up and down some, and the day'll maybe come that I make a hit. Look at old Bob Hickey, him that owned the Queen High and lost it to Clay Loftin in a poker game that most likely was rigged. Hickey's swamping in the Palace now, busted flat and down and out, trying to drown his trouble in booze. His gal, Bethany, pretty as a speckled pup and smart as a whip, has got a bake shop in town. Loftin's after her, when he ain't busy with the fancy women, but Beth's set her cap more for young Arch Wallach, a decent, honest storekeeper. But Loftin'll get the gal, one way or another, if somebody don't stop him."

"I'm beginning to dislike this Loftin considerable," drawled Jim Hatfield.

"You'll hate his guts when you see him," said Buck Collander, his thin, boyish face twisted with distaste. "The stink of that whole pack'd sicken a carrion crow. But they'll get caught up with some day."

"They sure will, Colly," agreed Hatfield. "Their kind always gets it, sooner or later."

They didn't set a watch, because Hatfield assured them that his sorrel would warn them of any intruders.

In the middle of the night, he was roused by Goldy's familiar trumpeting call. Instantly awake, Hatfield gripped his twin Colts and rolled out of the blankets, searching the darkness for targets. The crackle of brush came to him and the sound of hoarse, hushed voices. Moonbeams filtered through the trees, and the highland air was sweet with the scent of pine, spruce and balsam.

Then Hatfield spotted four shadowy forms prowling on foot toward the camp with hand-guns glinting in the moonlight. His Colts blasted a double warning in their direction.

The invaders fired back as they scattered crashing into the underbrush. Bullets ripped earth and stone pelting Hatfield with clods of dirt and splinters of rock. This time he aimed at the fleeting figures and heard an anguished howl go up through the roar of gunfire. Dad Dubiel and Collander brought their pistols into play now, throwing their shots at the winking muzzle lights in the woods.

THE shooting from outside ceased, as the raiders mounted and galloped off in headlong flight, having stirred up and set off more gunpowder than they cared to face in that sleeping encampment. Hatfield and his companions stood listening to the receding hoof-beats.

"They won't be back," Hatfield finally said. "They'd rather do their shooting at men who are asleep, it looks like."

Dubiel wagged his grizzled head. "Feller, you come awake and shooting quicker'n any man I ever seen anywhere."

"I've had some practice, Dad," confessed Hatfield. "What do you suppose they were after here?"

"Gold dust—which we ain't got. Horses and guns and gear, which we have got." Dubiel yawned and grimaced through his gray whiskers. "They'll steal anything, kill for anything—or nothing. The worst varmints from Old Mexico up to Canada have swarmed into Nevada, and I figure most of the lobo sons are tied with Clay Loftin's crew."

"Small stuff for a big operator to bother with, Dad."

"Nothing's too small to grab, for a man as et up with greed and ambition as that Clay Loftin is," said Dubiel. "The more his men steal, the less he has to pay 'em to keep 'em happy. That's why so many prospectors are found dead hereabouts, without a grain of gold left on 'em."

They crawled back into their blankets, and their slumber was not again interrupted. In the morning, after an early breakfast, they broke camp and traveled on into the north toward Eldorado, which Dad said they should reach about sundown or soon afterward.

They had grown to like one another on short acquaintance, and having burned powder together against a common enemy made them a close-knit trio almost from the start.

CHAPTER II

Mining Town

ELDORADO occupied a stepped valley in a lower range of the Trillon Mountains higher peaks rearing to the west, the foothills dropping into desert wastes on the east. Mineral Creek watered the valley, which north of the settlement narrowed into the famous Gulch, the stream lined with claims and sluices, the banks gouged with diggings and piled with gravel.

The mountainsides above the town, known as the Hill, were scarred by the silver mines, with shaft-houses and sheds, sorting bins and ore dumps. On the flats below the community were the reduction plants and stampmills. Night and day, huge mule-drawn ore wagons lumbered through the streets from the mines to the mills.

"Gold in the Gulch and silver on the Hill," said Dad Dubiel, as they approached in the early evening. "It ain't the boom town it was once, but it's still awake the clock around, working and playing hard."

Elaborate and rather hideous mansions stood on Tophat Terrace, overlooking the main business section. Dubiel pointed out the most grandiose one of all, which Clay Loftin had built.

Some of the lowest and most vicious dives in the West operated twenty-four hours a day in the Sinkhole district, below the trading center and adjacent to the reeking industrial plants. The entire scene was one of raw, brawling vigor and startling contrasts, the luxury and elegance of Tophat offset by the poverty and evil of the Sink. Jim Hatfield found it a strange and fascinating picture to study; a trifle overwhelming, but vital, colorful and exciting.

They stopped for a drink at the Last Mile Saloon, a relatively small and quiet spot on Main Street. The drunken derelict cadging drinks at the bar turned out to be Bob Hickey, a pitiful, sodden wreck of a once-handsome and strapping man. Dad Dubiel introduced him to Hatfield, who promptly ordered another round.

"I was robbed, Dad," said Hickey. "I was robbed and you know it, but I'll come back one of these days. The Queen High'll be mine again, you mark my words. Them cards Loftin used was marked, Dad, and some day I'll prove he stole the Queen High off me."

"I know, Bob, I know," Dubiel said soothingly. "But don't talk too much about it in public. Loftin might put some of his gundogs on you, Bob."

"I watch 'em—I'm ready for 'em," Bob Hickey said, grinning and winking as he patted the shoulder-slung gun under his left arm. "They ain't going to get me, Dad, but I'm going to call that dirty rotten Loftin before long. Trying to court my daughter, after what he done to me!"

When they left, Hickey was still draped over the bar and babbling away.

Dubiel said, "I'm afraid Bob'll disappear some night. Loftin'll get sick of all that talking Bob's doing, and have him put away."

"You think the game was crooked, the night Loftin won the mine?" inquired Hatfield.

"I'd bet my horse and mule on it," said Dubiel. "But how you going to prove anything like that, after all this time? Bob ought to forget about it and lay off the liquor and go back to prospecting. Made some good strikes when he was working at it, but Bob Hickey never could stand prosperity." Dubiel grinned. "Maybe I couldn't myself, but I'd sure like a chance to try it."

"The fun's in hunting for it, Dad," drawled young Collander. "After you hit it rich there's nothing left to do but spend your money, and that gets tiresome."

"Does it now, boy?" chuckled Dubiel. "I wouldn't know, but I ain't had all your wide experience. Tell us how it feels to be filthy rich."

"Go to hell, you old reprobate," Collander said, with a grin.

IN WALLACH'S GENERAL STORE, Hatfield met Arch Wallach, the personable young proprietor, who greeted Dubiel and Collander with sincere pleasure, readily agreeing to grubstake them again.

"Never lost nothing on these two yet," Wallach said, smiling soberly at Hatfield. "They're a good investment until they strike it big, and then they'll probably leave me holding the bag. You going in with them, Mr. Jimson?"

"I may try it awhile," Hatfield told him.

"They'd make more in the mines," Wallach said, with mock gravity. "But they're like wild mustangs when it comes to freedom. Just can't stand working in harness."

"You know what you can do with them mines, Arch." Collander grinned.

"The trouble is I don't own any of them, Colly," said Wallach.

"Maybe you've got something better here," Hatfield suggested.

Arch Wallach smiled brightly. "I think so, but I don't know. It's a lot slower, but it's sure and steady. As long as the ore lasts anyway." He turned to Dubiel. "Give me a list of what you'll want, Dad, and I'll have it ready for you any time you say."

They were discussing the provisions when a girl came in from the rear, and Wallach presented her as Miss Bethany Hickey. She was coolly correct with Hatfield, a young lady with poise and personality to complement her striking good looks, and genuinely delighted to see Dubiel and Collander back in town.

As they talked and laughed freely, Hatfield was able to observe the girl closely. Her face and figure had a thoroughbred purity of line, and she carried herself with the simple dignity of a young queen. Bob Hickey might have got the name of his mine from her. Bethany had rich golden-brown hair and deep, dark eyes. But under the calm surface, she was troubled and worried by something. Possibly her father and Clay Loftin.

The list of supplies completed, Arch Wallach said, "The town's pretty crowded. You better put your horses and mules out back in my stable and bunk in with me tonight. Dad and Colly know the layout, Jimson . . . Beth and I are going to meet Bob. her father."

Dubiel turned a shoulder to the girl and whispered, "In the Last Mile, Arch."

Wallach had spacious and comfortable living quarters behind his store; and after caring for their animals and eating a late supper the two prospectors and the Ranger settled down for the night there.

"Ain't that Bethany a beauty though, Jimson?" said Collander.

"She sure is," Hatfield said. "They make a nice couple. I wouldn't want to see anybody break them up."

"Yeah, Arch is aces all the way."

"Had you any ambition, kid," said Dad Dubiel, "you might be in a setup like this, instead of skyhooting round the country like a loco steer. Maybe even have a gal like Bethany."

"Aw, I couldn't stand waiting on trade, Dad." Collander laughed. "No more'n you could stand that prosperity you was beefing about."

In the morning Arch Wallach served them an excellent breakfast, after which they saddled up and rode north to explore the Gulch of Mineral Creek. The stream

was laced with sluice boxes and rockers, and overhung with long toms.

Prospectors were out panning in the water, or digging into the pot-holed banks. Their crude shacks were scattered along either shore. There were abandoned shanties along the way, and fewer gold-seekers than in the past, according to Dubiel.

"Some have given up and gone into the silver mines," he said. "And some have been killed and robbed. Not many ever get out of here with any dust on 'em. Loftin and his vultures see to that."

"How can Loftin fool so many people, Dad?" asked Hatfield.

"He's convincing, Jimson," said Dubiel. "He can talk a preacher right out of the pulpit. He's got a look and a way about him that folks just can't seem to resist. Loftin could've been a great actor or a great politician, or most anything he set his mind to. Instead he's a great thief and killer. They say not even Scalzi and Emmons can match him with a six-gun."

HATFIELD'S mission was looming more prodigious and monumental all the time. It was highly improbable that Loftin and his lieutenants would hold still for an arrest. They were too strongly and securely established here, the acknowledged rulers of this mining empire.

Well, the Rangers wanted them one way or another, dead if not alive, and Hatfield would have to deliver them. Either their living bodies or their death certificates. He would try to take them alive, but men like that would prefer death to going back to Texas in irons and facing the scaffold there.

The three riders passed the busiest portion of the Gulch, and examined barren stretches marked only by deserted cabins and claims. Dubiel pointed to where a crooked hogback ridge was bisected by the river.

"Always liked the looks of that place. Worked it once. That's my shack still standing there, still good and solid. Maybe the claim's in my name yet. But it's all worked out, wrung dry, long ago."

"Perhaps not, Dad," said Hatfield, scanning the terrain with sun-squinted green eyes. "The water washing through that ridgeline made for rich panning, at first. When it started to dwindle, you prospectors got impatient and pulled out." He glanced inquiringly at Dubiel, and the old man nodded his gray head. Hatfield suggested, "Let's spread out and have a look."

"You know something about this business, huh, son?" Dubiel asked.

"Not a whole lot, Dad," said Hatfield. "But I've worked with mining engineers a little, and picked up a few ideas about geology and mineralogy. They may not amount to a damn in this country, but it won't hurt to scout around some as far as I can see."

"You're plumb right," agreed Dubiel. "Always had a hunch about this spot, but it wasn't strong enough to hold me here. Something about that ridge looks like the mother lode to me."

They fanned out then,Dubiel taking the ridge on this side, Collander working the creek, and Hatfield crossing to follow the hogback on the opposite shore. He paused to inspect the gravel beach, getting down to sift the dirt through his fingers, before going on along the ridgeline. Dismounting there, and dropping the reins in front of Goldy, he began a slow and thorough study of the upfolded earth strata, probing here and there to examine specimens of soil and rock.

In his retentive memory Hatfield was endeavoring to summon back all the details he had learned from those mineralogists and geologists he had known in the past, grateful for always having had broad interests and an acquisitive mind. He had been in college on his way to a civil engineering degree, when the murder of his father had transformed him into a gun-fighting lawman.

Even top scientists couldn't predetermine the presence or absence of gold in subsoil, Hatfield supposed. But they could diagnose and trace symptoms that indicated whether or not the precious ore might be discovered there. Deep within

this gaunt ridge could be rich veins, he decided. It was worth a try to find out, at any rate.

When the three met back at the stout dugout cabin Dubiel had built into the wall of the Gulch, with a shed and corral adjoining it, Dad said:

"I'm for workin' the ridge, Jimson. It looks mighty good to me."

"Ain't much in the creek," said Collander. "But I kind of like the looks of that hogback myself. It's got a shine that comes from inside."

"I'd say it's as good a bet as any," Hatfield affirmed. "And you've got a ready-built place to live in right here."

"Ain't you coming in with us?" asked Colly, disappointment on his thin features.

"I'll probably bunk with you, Colly, but I won't have time to do much of the work."

Dubiel grunted, "Figured you was after something besides gold in Eldorado, Jimson, but that ain't no affair of ours. We'll file for you and call you a pardner anyway."

"All right, Dad," said Hatfield. "I'll help all I can, but I won't take any share of the returns."

He had to have a legitimate excuse for being here in the Trillons, and this covered him as well as anything. Another wandering prospector grubbing for pay dirt.

They staked out three claims under Dubiel's expert surveillance, and rode back into town to file their entries at the land office. When Dubiel and Collander loaded their horses and mules with provisions from Wallach's to head up the Gulch once more, Hatfield told them he was going to hang around town awhile and look the place over.

CHAPTER III

Where Accidents Flourish

WANTING to familiarize himself with the streets and general layout of Eldorado, Hatfield rode his sorrel around town in a leisurely fashion. From the mines on the mountainside he descended to the mansions of Tophat Terrace, then surveyed the business district on the wide middle level of the community.

From there he dropped into the Sinkhole, a squalid slum of saloons, gambling hells and parlor houses. Finally he made the rounds of the acid-reeking industrial flats where the stampmills thundered incessantly.

A fine towering figure on the splendid golden sorrel, Jim Hatfield attracted some attention but not a great deal, for the citizens of Eldorado were too busy living their own hectic, swift-paced lives to give much notice to anybody or anything outside their immediate sphere of activity.

The town was like a gaudy perpetual carnival, clamoring in raucous revelry and riot around the clock. Part of the population was always at play, while another segment toiled on the Hill or in the Gulch.

Toward evening Hatfield stabled Goldy in a livery barn, and washed up for supper in the Imperial Café. After eating he sauntered about the noisy, crowded streets with a cigar in his teeth, stretching his long legs and studying the weird bedlam of the place—still a boom town. He would not drop into the Silver Palace for a look at some of the fugitives he had come all the way up from the Brazos to extradite, he decided, until night fall.

It was not long after dusk when he headed for the Silver Palace, a gaudy saloon and gambling spot that glittered with pretension to grandeur with its huge mirrors, crystal chandeliers, and polished brass fixtures.

Early as it was, players were clustered around the gaming tables, and the long mahogany bar was lined two or three deep. Hatfield rested his elbows on the wood and toyed with his whisky glass.

There was little danger, he was thinking, of his being recognized. The four outlaws he wanted had left Texas before the Lone Wolf had come into prominence. Undoubtedly they had heard of him, but

they wouldn't know him by sight. Their misdeeds down there were so far behind them that they hadn't bothered even to change their names up here in Nevada.

A portly gentleman with a florid face and gray mustache, standing beside the Ranger, introduced himself as Doc Barlow. As he put it, "The preeminent physician of this fair metropolis, possibly because I'm the only one available."

They bought drinks in turn, and chatted lightly of this and that.

"I'm actualy more an undertaker than a doctor," Barlow said once. "Most of my patients are beyond medical or surgical help when they get to me. A few survive, of course, but they are seldom the same after their various 'accidents.' The characters in this city of gold and silver are quite thorough in the mayhem they practice. Many of the victims come from this emporium of chance."

"I was wondering if anybody ever won at these tables," Hatfield said musingly.

"Not often, or much," Doc Barlow admitted. "Although I wouldn't care to be quoted on the subject. The heavy winners—there are a few, now and then—rarely live long enough to enjoy their winnings. If Gila Glorney doesn't beat them to death with his bare hands, Perry Emmons or Deuce Scalzi or some other expert does it with a gun."

"Don't the Vigilantes ever investigate these killings?"

"The Vigilantes, I regret to state, take their orders from Clay Loftin, the kingpin of Eldorado. Clay Loftin owns this and most of the other leading casinos, as well as all the best mines on the Hill."

"Why do people stand for it?" queried Hatfield.

"Loftin's got half of them hoodwinked into thinking he is a paragon of civic virtue, and the other half too scared to utter a protest." Doc Barlow drank and licked whisky drops from his mustache. "I couldn't talk this way, my friend, if it wasn't for the fact that I happen to be the only medical man on Mineral Creek. Loftin's employees, some of them human enough to be vulnerable to bullets, occasionally require my services. Thus I may mouth words that would get another man killed in short order."

HATFIELD asked a few pertinent questions concerning medical practice, that startled Barlow into gasping:

"You're an M.D. yourself, man? You've come to share my manifold burdens, or perchance to drive me to sifting sand in the Gulch for my sustenance?"

"Nothing like that, Doc," Hatfield laughed. "I've just picked up a few things from having to treat gunshot wounds and injuries in the field."

The evening wore on, and Doc Barlow identified some of the men in the house in whom Hatfield was interested. Perry Emmons, dapper and debonair, with a pallid skeletal face and pale, icy eyes, paced through the boisterous throngs with the quiet assurance of a skilled gunman. Deuce Scalzi, dark and ugly and pockmarked, in rough miner's garb, swaggered up to talk with Emmons, thumbs hooked into his double-holstered gun belt.

When a massive brute-faced giant joined them, Hatfield knew he was looking at Gila Glorney before the doctor named the man. There were three of them, and Hatfield fairly ached to throw down on them and get it over with, then go after the man at the top—Clay Laftin.

But that wouldn't do, even if it were not suicidal. Patience was the thing, and the necessity of making any conflict here seem spontaneous and natural.

If he could hit a winning streak at one of the games, it might bring one of them down on him. Glorney, most likely. Hatfield studied the giant, and estimated his own chances in a rough-and-tumble brawl.

Hatfield was six-four and built with symmetrical perfection. Speed, grace and power were blended in his rangy frame. Glorney looked a bit taller and much bulkier. It would be a tough fight, but anything that reduced the odds essentially was welcome.

Hatfield figured that faro was the best layout to buck, and Doc Barlow upheld his selection.

In the beginning it was give and take, with Hatfield breaking about even. Gila Glorney came over and spoke to the dealer, and soon Hatfield began winning steadily. Either he was having a run, or Glorney, attracted by his formidable stature, wanted an excuse to tangle with him and had instructed the houseman to let him win.

Perry Emmons, sleek and suave and deadly, came and took over the faro bank. Hatfield continued to win, drawing a crowd of spectators to the board.

"Better quit, Jimson," whispered Doc Barlow. "Win much more, man, and you'll have Glorney on your neck."

Perry Emmons regarded the doctor with a bleak, skull-like smile. "Neglecting your drinking tonight, aren't you, Doc?" he asked pointedly. "You look a lot better at the bar."

Barlow mumbled some excuse, and waddled back to the bar with immense dignity. Hatfield grinned after him, and went on winning from the bank.

"I'm quitting when I hit five thousand —if I ever do," Hatfield said tentatively.

"Your privilege," said Emmons, deadpanned and indifferent.

When Hatfield had the five thousand in front of him, he withdrew from the game, to the disappointment of the onlookers who'd been pulling for him to break the bank. Emmons paid off without a qualm, and Hatfield returned to Barlow's side at the bar.

That was a lot of money for a working Ranger, but Jim Hatfield had no illusions about wealth derived from gambling. It didn't seem as if it belonged to him; it was more like a loan. If Glorney didn't take it off his battered body tonight, Hatfield would lose it in some other way.

Gambling money had less value than that earned by working. In the proper hands and circumstances, five thousand could mean a great deal, but this roll in Hatfield's pocket was like so much stage money.

ONE thing he meant to do with it, if he got away from the Palace intact, was to pay his partners' bill at Wallach's store, and leave a few hundred extra for them to draw on.

Hatfield saw Bob Hickey sweeping out the corners of the vast room, and wanted to hand him some of the winnings, but it would only launch Hickey on a momentous spree. Money was a strange thing. In some situations five thousand could mean a whole lot; in others it was virtually worthless.

Back home in Texas Hatfield could retire—if he could tear himself away from the Rangers—and start ranching on his own, eventually get married and raise a family the way a man should to round out a good full life. Marry a girl like Bethany Hickey or like one of the scores of lovely ladies Hatfield had encountered on other assignments, women he had been too busy to take a proper interest in.

But up here in Nevada, money was just something to fling across the bar or the gambling tables, something to bring on a battle with Gila Glorney. Gambling money was not like real money Hatfield realized full well.

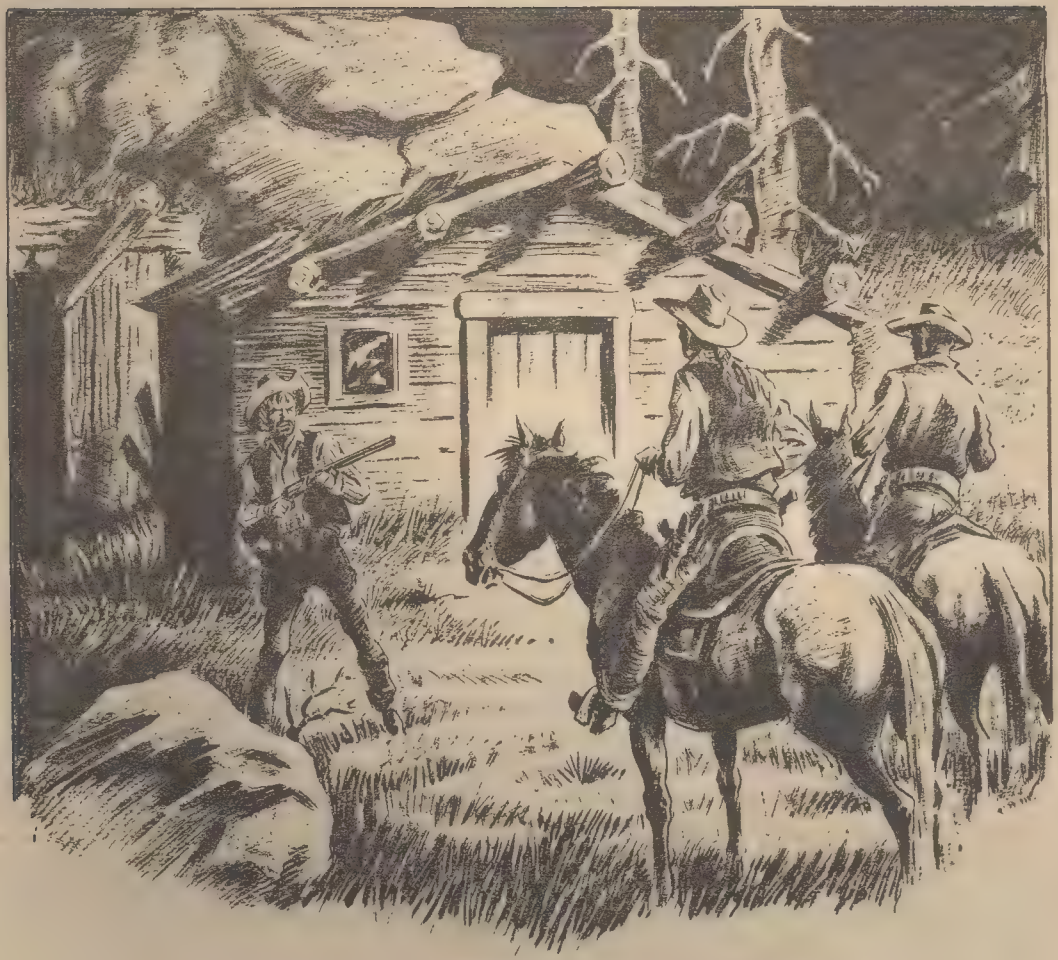
"You'd better lose that money back to the house or spend it somehow before you leave, Jimson," advised Doc Barlow. "Gila Glorney's got his eye on you and his hands will be on you the minute you step outside this gilded den of iniquity."

"Maybe I wouldn't mind a little scuffle with the big boy, Doc," drawled Hatfield.

"You're crazy, man!" groaned Barlow. "Stark, raving mad. You may be big and strong, and gifted in the art of self-defense, but that Gila monster tears men apart and breaks them to pieces. It has been my misfortune to labor over some of the human debris he has left out in front of the Palace. I have no inclination to see that fine body of yours in such a ghastly state, Jimson."

"Don't worry, Doc," said Hatfield casually. "I've fought bigger and better men than Glorney—I hope. See you later."

"If you're ever able to see again," muttered Barlow, gulping another drink and gazing gloomily after Hatfield's tall, easy-moving form.



"That you, Gila?" he called, pointing the rifle. "Who you got with you?"

The Ranger was barely outside the ornate batwings when the Gila struck, his knotted clublike fist raking the top of Jim Hatfield's skull as he ducked and spun with catlike reflexes, ripping left and right deep into Glorney's belly. The giant grunted and doubled up but his terrible arms were still swinging smashing at Hatfield's bared head and face.

The blows jolted Hatfield back on his heels, half-stunned and bleeding. He had never faced such strength as this oversized bruiser possessed. And to think he had wilfully brought it onto himself!

Glorney came bulling in, and Hatfield couldn't hold him off or get to one of his guns. They collided, and Gila's grappling arms closed with crushing force. They went down, rolling and threshing savagely, with Glorney on top, punishing the Ranger with fists, elbows, knees, and superior weight. Ground into the gritty planks, Hatfield thought he was done for, and Glorney must have thought likewise. For he got overconfident and careless. And Jim Hatfield hurled him off with a sudden explosive burst of fury.

They tumbled apart, scrambled upright and came together slugging with unleashed ferocity, beating each other back and forth under the wooden canopy. A crowd had gathered to ring them in, watching the primitive struggle in hushed, wide-eyed awe and wonder. Eldorado had

never seen a man stand up to Glorney like this, and the ranks swelled constantly as the word spread.

Both men were dirt-smeared, tattered, and dripping blood and sweat as they circled and lashed out, clinched, wrestled, and fell panting apart. But only to close again with whipping arms and slashing fists, rocking one another with wicked punches that would have knocked out, perhaps even killed, lesser men.

TO THE astonishment of the audience it was Gila Glorney who seemed to tire and weaken first. Hatfield was hitting faster, harder, and surer now, beating the Gila to every punch, shaking and jarring that huge bulk, with blood spattering at every stroke. Jim Hatfield's greater speed and coordination were telling as he kept Glorney off-balance, floundering and pawing the air.

Gila's gashed eyes were swelling shut, his whole face cut and welted into a crimson horror, and still Hatfield was throwing both hands with ever-increasing power, precision and swiftness. Watching men gaped and gasped in amazement. They had supposed Gila Glorney to be unbeatable. They had never expected to see a man fight like this human panther called Jimson was fighting.

At last Glorney's head and shoulders were drooping, his hands and knees were sagging, his body too heavy for them to hold up. Hatfield was arm-weary himself, and both fists felt broken, but the will to keep going and crush this monster still flamed in him at white-heat. Slamming the Gila back against the wall of the Palace, he pinned him there with his left and smashed his right repeatedly into that shattered, blood-streaming face.

Glorney kicked out with a heavy boot at his antagonist's crotch, but Hatfield slipped aside and hooked a left under the ear. With a grunting moan Glorney slumped sidewards, then fell forward off the building. Hatfield lifted his right knee into that toppling face, and chopped the back of the neck with his right hand.

Glorney collapsed and lay like a dead man, his ruined face on the dirty slats, his great limbs sprawled awry.

CHAPTER IV

Kingpin of Eldorado

FOR a moment Hatfield stood over Glorney on widespread jittering legs, chest heaving and bloody mouth open to suck in air. Sweat burned in his bruised eyes, and blood ran down his tortured face, throat and breast.

With blurred vision he saw Perry Emmons and Deuce Scaldi come swimming toward him. Then a tall elegant figure stepped in to bar their way. Hatfield knew the man was Clay Loftin, when he turned his handsome face.

"Who are you?" Loftin asked, in soft, cultured tones. "They call you Jimson, I'm told, but who are you? I need a man like you."

Hatfield shook his throbbing head. "Sorry. I'm kind of sick—right now."

He turned and stumbled through the massed spectators, with friendly hands holding him upright and slapping his back, to a nearby water trough into which he plunged his head, face and hands. When he straightened up, somewhat refreshed and restored, a man thrust his hat into his wet hands, and someone asked:

"What started it, Jimson?"

"Nothing," he panted. "Except I won five thousand at faro. And Glorney wanted—to get it back. The same old story."

The word was passed, and as an angry rumble went through the ranks, Hatfield knew he had gained some important ground here tonight. It was essential to have the people turn against Loftin, before the ultimate showdown came. This was a step in the right direction, at least, and Gila Glorney would be out of action for a time. Anything that lessened the odds was a boon to the Lone Wolf.

Fifty or a hundred men wanted to shake Hatfield's raw, swollen hand and buy him all the liquor he could drink, but he pleaded weariness, and finally escaped from the friendly mob. He made it to the back door of Wallach's living quarters on his own power, but was duly thankful when Arch Wallach came to catch him and deposit him on a handy bunk.

Doc Barlow arrived shortly afterward, puffing and sweating, but pleased with himself as well as with "Jimson."

"I played falling-down drunk to get away from taking care of Gila Glorney," he told them. "You did a most magnificent job on him, Jimson. I didn't think it was possible, but my hat's off to you, friend. It was the fight of the century, Arch. Too bad you missed it . . . Anticipating your needing a little attention, Jimson, I preferred to work on you for nothing, rather than to work on the Gila monster for a fat fee from Loftin. . . Arch, will you kindly bring some hot water and more lamps, and maybe a touch of brandy for the patient—*and* the doctor."

"You forget, Doc, I have plenty of money now," Hatfield murmured, smiling with sore, pulped lips.

"I won't take a penny of it, Jimson," said Doc Barlow. "This is strictly a labor of love. I couldn't be prouder of you, if you were my own son. And you've got the whole town buzzing like a beehive, buzzing against Clay Loftin and his lecherous, degenerate followers. I knew it would come some time, but I had begun to think I wouldn't live long enough to see the millennium. It always takes one man to start it, one knight in shining armor, and you're that warrior, Jimson. You're the man Eldorado has been waiting for."

"You give me too much credit, Doc," murmured Hatfield, sighing. He lay back on the bed, with pain stabbing and running all through him.

"It would be impossible to give you too much credit, son," declared Barlow, peering down at him. "You're a mess now, but I'll fix you up as good as new. You didn't fare badly at all, in comparison to Glorney. He's a litter case for the hospital. . . ."

JIM HATFIELD remained in Arch Wallach's bachelor quarters for two days, resting and recuperating under Doc Barlow's care. The doctor reported that Glorney was helpless in bed, beaten beyond any semblance of humanity. The Gila had lost most of his front teeth, and had a broken nose and cheekbone, a cracked collar-bone and ribs, among other injuries. He wouldn't be thrashing any drunken miners for some time.

Arch Wallach couldn't have been more thoughtful and considerate if Hatfield had been a lifelong friend, and Bethany Hickey spent much of her spare time from the bakery with Hatfield. She was intrigued by the big man with the steady gray-green eyes, grave, gentle smile, quiet, courtly manner and easy friendliness.

She sensed, too, that Hatfield's bigness was not in physical size alone. There was a depth and broadness in the man that was seldom encountered. And Bethany admired his looks, as well as his actions—the fine shape of his dark head and great hands, the strong bone structure of his bronzed face.

"I'm afraid for my father, Mr. Jimson," she confessed one day. "He's given up since he lost the Queen High. He just doesn't care any more."

"You afraid of anything else, Bethany?" Hatfield asked softly.

"Well, Clay Loftin worries me," she said. "I know he wants me, and he generally takes what he wants, by some means or other. He might even strike at my father or Arch, if he thought he could force my hand that way. Clay's a fascinating man, too. I don't trust him, but he can be charming."

"Don't become too fascinated, Beth."

"Oh, I won't," declared Bethany. "Arch is the man for me—solid and sincere and genuinely good. Clay Loftin isn't really fit to black Arch Wallach's boots."

"True enough," assented Hatfield. "Arch is a fine man."

Bethany stared at him with an interest

so warm and frank that Hatfield was mildly perturbed. "You're pretty fine yourself," she insisted. "I think you're going to make Eldorado a much better town to live in before you get through here."

Hatfield smiled slowly and shook his dark head in a deprecatory way. He was conscious of a pang of loneliness, but girls like Bethany Hickey were not for a Ranger who spent most of his life on manhunts.

Late on the second afternoon, Dad Dubiel and young Collander rode into the yard behind Wallach's store. They had just heard about the fight with Glorney, and they were relieved and happy to find Jimson all right except for some facial abrasions and discolorations that were rapidly healing and disappearing.

"I think we've got something in that ridgeline, Jimson," said Dubiel. "It's about the richest pay dirt I ever dug into, and showing more color all the time."

"Glad to hear that, but you'd better keep it quiet," Hatfield said.

"We ain't telling nobody," declared Collander. "But word might get out from the assayer's office."

Hatfield nodded somberly. "Loftin probably keeps a close check on that office, too. Wear your gunbelts all the time, and keep your rifles handy. I'll be out and see you tomorrow."

"Wish we couldn've seen that fight, Jimson," Collander said wistfully. "You must've done a helluva job on that big baboon."

"I should have finished him, Colly," said Hatfield. "But he didn't have a gun on him, I guess. The Vigilantes would've strung me up if I'd shot him."

Dubiel grinned through his gray beard. "Public opinion's turning against Loftin's outfit. Everybody's talking against that bunch of buzzards, where they never dared to before. You really started something, son. Maybe you figure on cleaning house before you get done?"

HATFIELD said, "Be a good thing to do, Dad, if things break right. Now I want you two to have a few drinks and get some things you need, on my take from the faro bank in the Palace." He pressed a hundred-dollar bill into each of their palms, and waved off their surprised protests. "It's Loftin money, boys. Enjoy it."

Hatfield had already paid their bill at Wallach's store, and left a thousand dollars with Arch for the partners' use whenever they might need it. For once he was going to make certain that some of this gambling money went for a good cause. The rest he'd no doubt lose back to the faro layout, to promote good will and avert suspicion.

Loftin was a little too curious about Hatfield, at this early stage. He'd likely try again to hire him, and when he couldn't would be apt to set his gunmen on him. Hatfield didn't want this to happen prematurely. Another visit to the Silver Palace and the loss of a few thousand might pay dividends in the time element.

Bathed, shaved, dressed in a new suit and accessories from Wallach's stock, Jim Hatfield strolled down the street that evening toward the Palace. Men hailed him from all sides, and heads turned to gaze after his tall well-groomed figure.

"Jimson! The man that whipped Gila Glorney," ran the word. "Nobody knows who he is or where he's from, but he's a tiger in a fist fight. And a gunslinger to boot, they say."

There were other comments, half-overheard by Hatfield passing by, and some of them troubled him. Like, "Came in with old Dad Dubiel and young Collander. Staked claims up the Gulch, and I hear tell they struck it pretty rich in the first two-three days."

So the news was out already. Some of Clay Loftin's gunhawks would be calling on Dubiel and Collander before long. There was a chilled feeling of premonition in Hatfield.

Loftin himself seemed to be in charge of the Palace tonight, a distinguished-looking man, handsome and aristocratic, in tailored broadcloth, with a light checked waistcoat, and two ivory-handled Colts in tied-down sheaths. A polished, self-assured man, with a winning smile and

an easy grace of bearing, he came forward at once to shake hands with Hatfield.

"Sorry about the other night, Jimson. That Glorney's always looking for a fight, but I doubt if he'll be so anxious to start one hereafter. Never expected to see any one man beat Glorney, but you certainly did it in championship style. Have a drink with me, Jimson?"

"Why not?"

Hatfield went to the bar with him, and a private bottle and gold-rimmed glasses were set before them. Loftin talked smoothly and well, and Hatfield scrutinized him without seeming to do so. It was difficult to see the evil in this cultured gentleman, yet it was there in awesome quantity. A wickedness far beyond that of his followers.

Clay Loftin tried shrewdly to pump Hatfield, but got nowhere. Taking another tack he said:

"Are you interested in finding employment in Eldorado, Jimson? As I said before, I can use a man of your caliber, and pay you more than you'll get out of working any claim in the Gulch."

"I'll think it over," Hatfield said, wanting to keep him on the hook. "When my money runs out, I'll make up my mind."

"Are you in a gambling mood? They tell me you do well at faro."

"I might give it a short whirl."

"Fine," said Loftin. "If you don't mind I'll take over the bank myself. That way we can talk as we play."

"Suits me," Hatfield said.

Loftin took the dealer's place at the faro board, and they began the game. Playing with careless diffidence, Hatfield won at first, and then began to lose.

"Your mind's not on the table," Loftin said once, and Hatfield simply shrugged and continued losing.

WHEN he had lost about two thousand, he indicated that he was through. He meant to retain some of that money for operating expenses which could run high in a boom town like this.

They returned to the bar, but Loftin wouldn't permit Hatfield to pay for as much as one round of drinks. Loftin had learned and accomplished practically nothing, except for winning back the two grand, but he concealed his disappointment and acted the perfect host.

Perry Emmons and Deuce Scalzi were nowhere in sight this evening, and Hatfield began to fear they might be up the Gulch visiting Dubiel and Collander. The giant Glorney was still confined to bed, according to the last report from Doc Barlow, but the Gila would soon be up and around again. It would take more than a bare-knuckle beating to keep a brute like that down for any length of time.

CHAPTER V

Girl Missing

PROMISING to give his decision regarding a job within a few days, Hatfield took his leave of Clay Loftin and walked back toward Arch Wallach's home. He intended to change his clothes, get Goldy, and ride up the Gulch at once, but he found Wallach closing the store in order to go hunting for Bob Hickey, with a tearful and distraught Bethany standing by in desperate anxiety. Arch asked Hatfield to join him in the search, and he couldn't very well refuse after all the kindness they had shown him.

They left Beth in Arch's living room, and started scouring the town for old Bob Hickey. He was in none of his usual Main Street haunts, which was what had alarmed Bethany. There were only a few drinking places in which Hickey was tolerated nowadays.

Wallach and Hatfield began a systematic search of the Sinkhole dives then. But wearisome hours of hunting disclosed no trace of Bob Hickey.

Trudging homeward in the early-morning hours, they dreaded reporting their failure to Bethany. It was some relief to discover Doc Barlow sitting up with the girl. Doc made her take a sedative and

go to bed.

The search went on throughout the next day and far into the night. It was three o'clock in the morning again when Hatfield and Wallach finally stumbled onto Bob Hickey sleeping soddenly in an empty stall of the stable behind the Miner's Hotel. They carried old Bob home and dumped him into bed in Bethany's quarters at the rear of the bake shop.

Hickey didn't wake up to appreciate or condemn this service. But the heartfelt gratitude of Bethany was more than enough reward for their prolonged and diligent efforts on her behalf.

Soon after sunup that morning, Jim Hatfield was mounted on Goldy and riding for the Gulch, groggy after only two hours of sleep, heading for the claims where Mineral Creek cut through that crooked transverse ridge. He knew something was wrong. He could feel it. Something had happened to old Dad and young Colly.

Hatfield was late, a whole day later than he'd promised. "Late, too late," kept dinning in his numbed brain. He urged the sorrel into a full gallop up the wagon road, with alders and scrub cedar flowing past shiny with dew. White vapors shrouded the stream.

When Hatfield saw two horsemen coming downtrail dragging a rude Indian-type travois, he feared the worst. He was sure a couple of bearded prospectors were bringing in the riddled bodies of Dubiel and Collander. Clamped in the freezing clutch of horror, and blazing mad under the ice, Hatfield pulled up beside the riders.

There was only one man on the litter. Dad Dubiel, his seamed face as gray as his hair and beard, drained gaunt and ghastly, with reddened bandages swathing his chest and shoulder.

"What happened?" demanded Hatfield.

"We heard shooting late last night," a brown-whiskered man said. "When me and Brod got there it was all over. Dad was laying across his rifle. The kid and the gold dust was gone. From the tracks, five or six men had jumped the camp, and they lugged young Colly off with 'em. It sure don't pay to strike it too rich in the Gulch."

"How bad did Dad get it?"

"Bad enough, but he may pull through. Dad's a tough old rooster."

"I'll take him in to Doc Barlow, if you men want to get back to your claim," Hatfield said.

"All right, mister. You're Jimson, I reckon. No need of all of us going in, I guess. We sure hope Dad'll be all right."

"Thanks for bringing him in this far," Hatfield said, saluting as the prospectors wheeled their mounts back up the Gulch. "Barlow will save him if anybody can."

HE STEPPED down beside the travois. Dubiel's sunken eyes flickered open.

"You're almost into town, Dad," he said. "I'll get you to Doc Barlow's in a few minutes."

"They carried Colly off, Jimson," the old man whispered weakly.

"They won't get far with him, Dad," promised Hatfield. "Lay back and relax. Take it easy and don't fret."

Dubiel groaned and closed his eyes. "Scared for the kid," he muttered.

"You know who jumped you?"

Dubiel rolled his head in a negative. Hatfield picked up the travois ropes and swung back into the saddle, retracing his way toward Eldorado at a slow even gait.

In town he hauled the litter straight to the doctor's home and carried Dubiel into the office. Bleary-eyed and bedraggled, in nightgown and bathrobe, Barlow directed the Ranger to place the patient on the operating table.

"You all right, Doc?" asked Hatfield, eying him narrowly. "You want to have a clear head and a steady hand this morning. This is one you've got to save."

"I'll be fine as soon as I wash the sleep out of my eyes and get scrubbed up," Barlow snapped testily. "You scrub up, too, and you can assist me. You're always showing off your medical knowledge. Now we'll see if you're good for anything or not, Jimson."

It was nearly noon when Hatfield left the doctor's office, empty and exhausted.

Dad Dubiel was sleeping soundly under drugs, and they were both convinced that the old-timer would live and recover.

Hatfield rode up the Gulch to the claim and picked up the trace of the raiders, but the tracks vanished into Mineral Creek after a few miles and he was unable to discover where they emerged from the water although he spent most of the afternoon scouting the banks.

It was night again and Eldorado was fully abloom and roaring when Jim Hatfield rode back into town and dismounted in Wallach's backyard. Hatfield was in the kitchen talking with Arch Wallach when the door banged open and old Bob Hickey blundered in ill and spent from his debauch and frantic with fear.

"Beth's gone!" he panted wildly. "They got Bethany! Loftin or some of his crew took her off somewheres. You got to hurry, Arch! No telling what them critters'll do to that poor little girl. Get your guns and take after 'em, Arch! I'd go myself, but I'm too damn sick to stand up, let alone fight." Hickey moaned in abject misery and despair. "Hurry up, Arch boy. This big man'll help you, Arch."

"Been afraid of something like this for quite a spell, Jim," said Arch Wallach, as he threw a saddle onto his chunky brown mare. "Clay Loftin can't ever get enough of anything. He always wants more. More money, more power, more women, more pleasure."

"Where you going to look first, Arch?" asked Hatfield. "His house?"

"Yeah, we'll try Loftin Hall first."

"He ought to know he can't get away with this."

"He thinks he can do anything he wants to," Wallach said. "He thinks he's God, I guess."

Mounted and climbing a dark steep street toward Tophat Terrace, Hatfield was inclined to doubt that Loftin had kidnaped Bethany. He wouldn't mention what he thought to Arch Wallach but he

A TALL TEXAS TALE

Maria's Miracle

WHEN telephones first come to Zulch, Texas, nearly every home got one but some old-timers wouldn't use them. For instance, Ezra Twist, who claimed his ancestors were tobacco growers in Virginia and boasted that he come from the tobacco Twists, wouldn't go near one, insisting that they was the work of the devil. His wife, Maria, had one at home and camped on the party line from morning till night.

One day we was sitting around Mordecae Hickenlooper's general store gassing and some of the boys tried to needle Ezra into talking on the phone. Finally, he seemed to weaken and Mordecae said:

"Come on, Ezra, break the ice. I'll git Maria on the line and you talk to her."

There happened to be a storm going on with lots of lightning and thunder. Ezra was pale when he stepped to the phone and the instant he took the receiver in his hand lightning struck the wires and he was knocked flat on the floor.

As we picked him up he mumbled, "That shore was Maria, all right."

—W. L. Hudson

suspected that Beth had gone of her own volition. She'd had a taste of luxurious high life when her father was a mine owner and it wasn't easy for a girl to forsake it all and forget entirely. Bored and tired of her drunken father and her dull, stolid storekeeper, Bethany might be seeking diversion and escape with the handsome, gallant Clay Loftin.

BUT that didn't lessen her danger, of course. Among other despicable things, Loftin was notorious as a despoiler of women. Hatfield felt cold, controlled anger, but it was directed against the girl as well as the man. Why were women forever doing such damn-fool things, letting their flighty emotions govern instead of their minds? Homes, families and whole lives were ruined in moments of utter folly.

Lights showed dimly within the depths of the elaborate mansion, and there was no sign of guards outside. They dismounted beside the street, Wallach dropping his reins while Hatfield left his looped on the horn. Approaching the entrance, they loosened their guns in leather.

The bell chimed in the interior, and a Chinese servant opened the door. Then Clay Loftin appeared in the hallway, and the servant withdrew.

"What do you want here?" Loftin asked coldly.

"Bethany Hickey," said Wallach, voice taut and choked.

Loftin glanced at Hatfield. "And what is your interest in this matter?"

"Returning a favor to friends of mine," Hatfield said casually.

"You're a busy man, Jimson. A man of almost too many interests. I don't consider this any of your business, either one of you, but Bethany came here of her own free will this evening."

"You lie!" blurted Wallach, quivering with rage.

"Guard that tongue of yours, boy," Loftin said, with cool contempt.

Wallach started to draw, awkward and jerky, but Hatfield restrained him with gentle firmness. "Hold it, Arch." Then to Loftin, "We want the girl."

"If she wishes to leave with you, she is at liberty to do so," Clay Loftin said calmly. "I never found it necessary to make prisoners of my women." He walked away with insolent ease.

Wallach would have surged after him, but Hatfield held him in place.

Bethany Hickey came into the corridor, shame and relief mingled on her patrician features, and ran toward them with a muffled sob. Loftin watched from the inner doorway, mild disdain on his carved face.

"Don't come again until you know your own mind, Bethany," he called lightly, mockingly.

Wallach was ready to spring again, but the girl came running into his arms.

Jim Hatfield and Clay Loftin stood staring at one another in the elegant dimness. Deeper inside the house, Hatfield glimpsed some of its fabulous opulence. Floors of oak parquet, fireplaces and columns of Carrara marble, oil paintings, tapestries, and Oriental rugs. Gold and silver doorknobs and fixtures, windows of French plate-glass, and a great piano of bronze. Enough to dazzle almost any woman, particularly when owned by a romantic figure like Clay Loftin.

The two big men measured each other in silence. Both knew now that the time would come when they'd face one another through gunsmoke.

"Get out," Loftin said, at last.

"I'll be seeing you," drawled Hatfield, with a grave smile.

"You certainly will, mister!" Clay Loftin said.

Hatfield, Wallach and the girl were under the porte-cochere moving toward the horses in the street, when guns blasted at them from the corner of the vast structure. Arch Wallach lurched and fell, taking Bethany down with him and covering her with his body. Hatfield swiveled and drew, his Colts blazing and jumping in his big hands.

There seemed to be four gunmen back there. Muzzle flashes illuminated the misshapen brute-face and crouching bulk of Gila Glorney, back on active duty once

more. The killers were breaking backward under Hatfield's rapid fire, their pistols still flaring and crashing, the air alive with crackling bullets.

HATFIELD felt the scorching windlash of near misses, and went on hammering his shots at them in the murky darkness. Gun flames slashed to and fro along the façade of the mansion. One of the men behind Glorney crumpled to earth, and another dragged him into deeper shadows.

Arch Wallach began shooting from the ground, and this added firepower routed the bandits. They vanished beyond the far cornice.

Hatfield helped Wallach to his feet. "Go on, Arch. Get Beth out of here."

Wallach limped off, with Bethany half-supporting him, while Hatfield punched out empties and reloaded beneath the porte-cochere.

Guns flashed and roared again from that corner, until Jim Hatfield's blistering fire silenced them once more and drove the gunmen back to cover. Bethany and Wallach, mounted double on the stout brown mare, were riding down the side hill street by this time.

Hatfield whistled shrilly and Goldy came on the run. He made a flying mount, wheeling the sorrel, finding the stirrups, and racing away from Loftin Hall with a few final shots screaming after him. Then he was out of range, overtaking the others. They dropped quickly from Top-hat Terrace to the level of Main Street.

"You hit bad, Arch?" inquired Hatfield, as they slowed the pace.

"Don't think so. Just burned my thigh. You can sure work those Colts, Jimson."

"Lucky to get out of that one," Hatfield said. "I hope you realize how lucky we were, Bethany."

"Don't worry," she said humbly. "I've learned my lesson—very well indeed."

"He wouldn't let you go next time, Beth."

"There won't be any next time," the girl promised firmly.

They rode on.

CHAPTER VI

Stamped Out

DOC BARLOW came out of the Wallach home when they rode into the back yard. Hatfield piled off to lower the girl from behind Arch, and then lift the wounded man from the saddle and carry him inside. Bob Hickey was snoring on one of the bunks. Hatfield laid Wallach on a rawhide couch. The leg was bleeding profusely, but Arch didn't think the wound was deep or serious.

"This place is getting to be a regular damned field hospital," Doc Barlow grumbled, cutting away the blood-soaked pants leg. "Just gave old Bob something to quiet him down, and it put him to sleep like a baby. Now here's Arch needing to be patched up." He made a hasty examination, and smiled at the watching faces. "Shallow and superficial. Nothing bad at all. Even a fake doctor like Jimson here could attend to this one."

Bethany and Hatfield exchanged relieved glances, and Beth said, "I overheard something about young Collander, Mr. Jimson. Glorney came in and started talking to Clay, not knowing I was in the house. They're holding Colly somewhere—down at the stampmill, I think. Trying to force him into signing the claim over to them, I guess, and telling them where the rest of the gold dust is hidden."

"I'll ride down there," Hatfield said. "They're probably treating the boy pretty rough."

"You can't go alone," protested Dr. Barlow.

"Why not?" Hatfield said, smiling. "Colly's my partner. This is my job. You tend to your own work there, Doc."

"All right," said Barlow, ruddy cheeks dimpling above the gray mustache. "I've got Dad Dubiel on the road to recovery now. You go and take care of your other partner."

"Be careful," pleaded Bethany earnest-

ly, and he smiled reassuringly at her from the door.

Outside in the night again, where the stars were sparkling over the serrated tiers of the Trillons, Jim Hatfield climbed aboard Goldy and headed for the industrial flats, beyond and below the Sinkhole of Eldorado. He had marked the main reduction plant of the Loftin organization, and that was his initial objective.

On the bottoms the air was rank with the smell of acids and minerals, and the earth vibrated to the thunder of stampmills and other machinery. Ore wagons rumbled in from the mines, loaded, and rattled back from the finishing plants empty. The town rose in three distinct steps above the factories—the Sink, then Main Street, and above that Tophat Terrace. And the lights of the mines glittered high over all the rest.

When Hatfield saw a half-dozen horsemen coming toward him, he kneed the sorrel off into a wagon yard and waited in darkness among the huge vehicles. As they passed in the flare-lit street, he spotted Pery Emmons, Deuce Scalzi and a man named Magoon. The other three he didn't recognize, but they were all Loftin gunhands without question.

Gila Glorney was not with them, however. The Gila had probably stayed behind to work Collander over some more. It filled the Ranger with fury to think of the cruel abuse that kid must be taking as a captive. After the six riders were well past, he pushed on toward the Loftin stampmill.

It was shaped like a T, the top fronting the street and containing offices and laboratories, the stem extending rearward in the direction of the desert and shuddering with the rise and fall of the stamping machines.

A few horses were racked before the building, but the front windows were dark. The mill ran all night, but the offices and labs were closed. The main entrance was dimly lighted, though, and the door opened under Hatfield's hand. The central corridor stretched emptily before him, with a few lamps glowing in wall-brackets along the way.

Hatfield strode toward the lights and the roaring racket at the rear.

HE HOPED to meet Glorney alone, if the Gila was on the premises. It was fortunate for Hatfield's purpose that the other gunsharps had departed before his arrival. He didn't imagine that the workmen were especially loyal to Loftin, or had any great love for Gila Glorney, who doubtless was a brutal slave-driving boss. They weren't likely to interfere in a gunfight. They might even rejoice over Glorney's downfall, and hail his killer as a hero and savior.

Hatfield wouldn't worry about the millhands, at any rate. Gila Glorney was problem enough in himself.

An office door opened on the right, and Jim Hatfield threw his right-hand Colt clear to cover it. But the man who appeared was small, wizened and shriveled from age and labor, evidently an unarmed watchman or janitor. Blinking at the gun, he raised trembling clawlike hands.

"Where's the prisoner they've got here?" demanded Hatfield.

"Right in here, mister. But I ain't had nothing to do with it. I just took the boy some grub and water. I been doing all I could for him right along, and he'll tell you the same thing."

"Where's Glorney?"

"Out in the mill."

"Any other gunmen around?"

The little man wagged his bald head. "No. The rest pulled out."

"How do the workers like Glorney?"

"They hate the ground he walks on, and so do I."

Hatfield pondered briefly. "I'll have a look at Collander first."

"You won't like it, mister."

The old man reopened the door, and led the way into a small bare office, lighted sparsely by a bull's-eye lantern. Hatfield followed, shutting the door behind himself, gun in hand. Collander lay on the floor, ankles and one wrist shackled to a heavy desk. His face, smashed and swollen out of shape, was caked with dry

blood, but he was conscious and he tried to smile.

"Sure glad to see you, Jimson. How's old Dad?"

"He's going to be all right, Colly. How are you?"

"Fine, so far," Collander said. "But you came just in time. Glorney's gone after some acid to use on me. They want me to sign over my claim. And they think we've got some more dust cached away some place."

Hatfield swore quickly and turned to the watchman. "You got the keys to those irons? Turn him loose."

"They're right here." The man opened a desk drawer and removed a key ring, kneeling to unlock the manacles. "Been wanting to do this for some time, son."

"You're all right, Pop," said Collander. "You helped me plenty."

The young fellow got up, slow and painful, flexing his arms and legs, walking stiffly about the dim room.

"Who jumped you at camp, Colly?" asked Hatfield.

"Emmons and Scalzi and Magoon and some others."

"Who's been working on you here?"

"Glorney mostly," said Collander. "Them other three had a hand at it too, before the Gila took over."

"Take this, Colly, and wait here," Hatfield said, handing his left-hand Colt to the boy. "I'm going to meet the Gila, then we'll get out of here. You limber up as much as you can Col."

"I'll be ready," Collander promised. "I ain't hurt bad—just my good looks gone. We got to get after them others, too. They've begun to think you're a Texas Ranger, all the way up here to get 'em.

They figure there's more Rangers coming, and they're getting ready to light a shuck. Heard 'em talking tonight. Emmons, Scalzi and them have gone up to the Queen High now, to pack up some of that fortune they got planted there, I reckon."

HATFIELD assured him, "We'll follow them up, when I get through with Glorney."

"I won't insult you by askin' to help." Collander grinned painfully. "You took the Gila barehanded, so I reckon you can take him with a six-gun. I'll wash some of this off my mug."

He bent over the water bucket, and Pop stood by holding a towel for him. Hatfield opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

Striding back to the jarring thunder of the mill, he was more than ready to meet Gila Glorney and kill him, if necessary, after having seen young Buck Collander's pulped, broken face. This time it would not be any fist fight, although the Ranger longed to feel the giant's hide under his knuckles once more.

This time, if Glorney did not submit to arrest peaceably, it would be a fight to the finish—and with fury rising hot, but restrained inside him, Hatfield was ready and eager for it.

When he opened the door into the reduction plant, the reeking heat struck him in the face. He was deafened by the terrific din, sickened by the poisonous stench. It was like a steaming inferno. The night shift workmen were naked to the waist, sweat-shining and reddened from the hot ore.

A row of stamps thundered up and down on the right, and machinery smoked and roared on the left. Workers turned grimy dripping faces to glance without interest at the man who entered, and he wondered how men could toil eight, ten or twelve-hour shifts in such a hell-hole. It was enough to drive a man insane.

He searched through the steam and smoke for Glorney, then saw the giant coming up the aisle between the machines and the stamps, carrying a small bottle in his left hand. Gila spotted him at the same moment, his mutilated features snarling through his surprise.

His right hand slapped at a holster, but Hatfield's smooth flawless draw was seconds faster. Flame burst from its barrel as it came level and lined. Glorney's right arm jerked and the hand crimsoned as the slug ripped the pistol from his grasp and sent it skidding along the filthy floor. In the murky, fogged air Hatfield had missed the body.

Glorney's second weapon was coming to bear when Jim Hatfield threw down from the recoil and thumbed another shot at him. The bullet struck the hand in which the giant still clutched the bottle of acid, shattering both the hand and bottle as it tore on through to bury itself in Glorney's side below the ribs.

The searing acid took immediate effect on the fresh wounds. Glorney's terrible screams rose through the shattering sound of the stamps as he writhed and twisted and tore at his own tormented flesh, leaping and flailing about like a berserk monster.

Bounding blindly sideward, he rammed into a guard-rail. It would have stopped a smaller man, but it merely tripped the Gila into a spread-eagled dive through space. He landed in a steaming bed of ore directly beneath an immense stamp that was shivering at the top of its stroke. Men sprang to turn off the machine, but there wasn't time. The massive steel shaft stamped down into its bed with remorseless, crushing force.

Retching sick, Jim Hatfield turned and walked away, back the way he had come, as the machinery groaned to a halt and the great mills ceased their violent stamping. Perhaps Glorney fully deserved his fate, but Hatfield had never meant to deal it out in that way. He wished his bullets had killed quick and clean, as he intended them to. But the stinking heat and hideous racket of the place had thrown his aim off a bit.

Well, it was over and done with. One of the four men he had come after was dead. Hatfield would have preferred a different

ending, but it couldn't be recalled now.

CHAPTER VII

Deep in the Earth

LITTLE POP met Hatfield in the doorway between the mill and the front office section, and the Ranger knew from the old man's expression that he had seen it all.

"Don't you feel bad about that boy," Pop said earnestly. "The Gila had it coming. If you knew all the men he'd broken, smashed, crippled and killed, you wouldn't be sorry for finishing off Gila Glorney, son. Just what he done to your friend out there's enough."

But Jim Hatfield couldn't shake off the feeling of regret.

Collander was waiting for him outside of the office that had been his cell and torture chamber. Colly looked better since washing up, but he'd carry the marks of Glorney's fists the rest of his life.

"You don't look too glad, Jimson," he said.

"I messed it up, Colly. Didn't do it the way I wanted to."

"Well, the Gila's dead, ain't he? That's good enough for me. Let's get out of this damn place."

"We're on our way, kid," Hatfield said. "You can borrow a horse out front. Take Glorney's, if you know which one it is."

"I know his horse . . . Jimson, are you really a Texas Ranger?"

Hatfield nodded somberly. "No harm in letting it out now, Colly."

"Boy, oh boy!" Collander said, with awe and reverence. "Always wanted to meet up with a real live Ranger, and now I got one for a pardner!"

Hatfield was ready to laugh when he observed that the young prospector was entirely solemn. He laid an arm around Collander's lank shoulders affectionately and they went out the front door together.

Climbing the mountainside toward the Queen High, Hatfield on Goldy and Collander on Glorney's big claybank, they exchanged stories to bring one another up to date on events. Collander had been through the Queen High when Bob Hickey owned it, and he knew the underground pattern fairly well. There was a horizontal shaft below the ore dump, which Loftin's men often used. Colly suspected that their treasure cache was in that tunnel.

"They ain't working a shift tonight, I guess," he said, peering upward through the darkness. "There's more lights and action on top when the night shift's going. They'll have some men up in the shafthouse though, stokers and guards and such, to keep the boilers steamed up and the water pumps running."

"Loftin's built himself quite an empire here," Hatfield observed. "He's smart, clever and capable enough. Could've been a big man in this country, if it wasn't for that rotten crooked streak in his nature. He organized the Vigilantes to protect himself, cover up his own crimes. Loftin thinks of almost everything, Colly, he should've remembered that the Texas Rangers never forget or forgive or quit on a trail."

"Is Jimson your real name?"

The Ranger shook his head. "It's Jim Hatfield. Jim, to you, Colly."

Collander stared at him. "Why, hell, I've heard about you, Jim! Men talk about you all over the West. This really something, to be riding with Jim Hatfield! You s'pose I could make the Rangers, if I went back down there with you, Jim?"

"I'm sure you could, Colly," said Hatfield. "But don't forget, kid, you and Dad have got a rich claim to work on Mineral Creek."

"I'd hate to leave Dad Dubiel, for a fact," Collander murmured. "But I don't much give a damn about the gold. I was real glad to hear old Dad's coming along good, Jim. I was afraid they'd killed him that night they hit us."

"And all Dad thought about was you, Colly."

Collander swallowed and grinned. "Ain't he a rare old bird, though?"

IN FRONT of the mouth of the tunnel they were heading for, was a sentry shack and a corral holding six saddled horses and a few others without saddles. Higher on the slope loomed a ragged ore dump, with trestle and track above it, outlined against the starry sky.

Keeping in the shadow of trees, they approached the shanty. A man emerged with a rifle in his hands.

"That you, Gila?" he called. "Who you got with you?"

Hatfield grunted something as they rode in close. The guard cursed and started to train his rifle on them, but Collander left his saddle in a reckless flying leap, landing on the sentry and bearing him backward to the ground. Left hand fastened on the fellow's throat, Collander chopped down with the gun in his right hand, knocked the man senseless beneath him.

"Nice work, Colly," approved Hatfield, as they quickly tied and gagged the unconscious guard.

"Here's your gun, Jim," said Collander, handing it over. Then he stripped the gunbelt off the fallen man, and buckled it about his own slender waist, trying the pistols in their sheaths once the harness was adjusted.

"They must be in the mine," Hatfield said, scanning the ponies in the corral. "Emmons, Scalzi, Magoon, and three others."

He found and lighted lanterns in the shack, handing one to Collander, and they headed into the black horizontal shaft with the yellow light flickering and throwing grotesque shadows around them. The pressure that comes when deep underground closed on them, as they penetrated far into the tunnel, past ore cars and tools and the debris of minework.

"I wouldn't work down here for all the silver in Nevada," said Collander, wetting his puffed, cut lips with his tongue.

"It's even worse in the stampmills, I think," Hatfield said.

"Dad's got the right idea, Jim," said Collander. "Work for yourself, even if you go broke and hungry once in awhile. Be free and footloose, on your own."

"That's a good life all right."

"I'd rather be a Ranger, though."

"I don't know, Colly," said Hatfield. "It's a good life, too—for a certain kind of man."

"You wouldn't change, would you, Jim?"

"No. Not for some time, anyway. Probably not until I'm too old to ride and fight."

Collander laughed. "You'll never get *that* old, Jim!"

"It comes to everybody, Col," Hatfield said thoughtfully. He almost could feel the inexorable pace of time along with the subterranean pressure.

They heard sounds then and saw a faint glimmer of light ahead, and doused their lanterns to stand and wait in the smothering darkness.

"Who's out there?" a voice echoed along the gallery. "Speak up, dammit! Who's there?"

No answer. The footsteps and lights came slowly nearer. Hatfield drew Collander behind an ore car.

Lanternlight flashed suddenly clear at a bend in the tunnel, and a shadowy group halted nervously there, squinting into the blackness that concealed the waiting pair before them. Perry Emmons, his face like a death-mask, the tough swaggering Deuce Scalzi, the hawkbeaked sour-mouthed Magoon, and three other hardcases came forward again.

In back of the ore car Hatfield and Collander lifted their guns clear.

"Get your hands up!" Hatfield called, with sudden strong clarity. "You're covered, men, and you're all under arrest."

The lanterns were snuffed out as the six scattered for cover. Guns flamed and boomed in the shaft. Lead hammered the steel-sided body in front of the Ranger and the battered young prospector, shrieked off rock walls. Hatfield and Collander fired back at the muzzle flashes until gunfire was like lightning, streaking back and forth in the corridor. Concussions hurt the eardrums in that confined space.

LAYING their shoulders into the rear of the car, Hatfield and Collander bucked it into motion along the track, shooting as they shoved it ahead of them, a cumbersome but mobile shield. The outlaws retreated stubbornly before this slow advance, firing as they fell back along either side of the tunnel. The blast of guns and the screech of ricochets burdened the dark air with hideous sound, and powdersmoke swirled choking-thick under the cross-beamed ceiling.

A man cried out with shock and pain, and Hatfield glimpsed a toppling body in the vicious spurt of gun flames. The other hardcases broke and fled before that steady armored advance, and the swift shooting of Jim Hatfield and his companion. They would be running for the elevator cage, the Ranger thought, to be hoisted up the vertical shaft to safety.

Pausing to reload, he took up the blind pursuit with Collander, leaving the car behind them, and feeling their way along the wall in the dense blackness. The scrape of boots and sound of voices receded in front of them.

Stumbling over a body, Hatfield scratched a match to examine the gunman they had shot down. He was dead, sightless eyes staring widely. Collander said his name was Sontag, and that he had been one of the raiders who had jumped their claim in the Gulch.

The match burned out, and they pressed onward, slow and stumbling in this eternal underworld night.

Once more the cavernous depths ahead were illuminated vaguely, this time from a hanging lantern in the cage of the shaft car. It was just beginning to rise, with a creak of cables and the grind of distant machinery.

Hatfield and Collander threw shots at the elevator, and gunfire stabbed back at them as the lighted cage was hoisted up the shaft and out of view. They were left alone in that inky pit with a dead man, while the five bandits rode upward.

Collander flicked a match alight. "Come on, Jim," he said hurriedly. "There's a ladder in this cutback."

They reached it before the matchlight faded and Collander started climbing, with Hatfield after him. The iron rungs were cold and damp, flaked with rust and grit. The climb seemed endless, and they kept expecting gunshots to explode downward into their faces. It was almost certain, though, that the outlaws would stop the lift and lay in ambush at one of the upper levels.

They gained the next gallery without interference however, and stopped to rest.

"One more tunnel," panted Collander. "And then the top—the shaft-house."

"They'll be waiting for us up there, Colly," warned Hatfield.

"Don't think so. Won't expect us to climb all this way."

Hatfield tried to slip in front of Collander and climb ahead of him, but the young prospector beat him to it and mounted in the lead, as before.

"The damn kid can't wait to get his head blown off," Hatfield muttered, as they labored upward from rung to rung in the pitch darkness of the narrow shaft.

The air was poor and breathing difficult. Both were panting and sweating hard as they climbed.

"Have your gun ready, Colly," advised Hatfield, drawing his own right-hand Colt when he figured they must be nearing the next tunnel.

Abruptly flames slashed downward with a terrible roar, almost in Collander's face, but somehow he was unhit, and was firing up the ladder into that fading muzzle light. There came the rush of a falling dark body, tumbling into Collander's gun flame.

He twisted, flattened, and yelled, "Look out, Jim!"

Hatfield pulled aside on the ladder, braced and holding tight as a hurtling weight smashed his broad shoulder and wedged itself between him and the wall. There was no more shooting from above. The fleeing outlaws must have figured that one man was enough to stop any climbers, and he should have been. But luck and Colly's quick action had saved

the pair on the ladder.

Hatfield lit a match and glimpsed the hawk face of Magoon, with a neat bluish hole in his forehead. The back of the skull was not so neat, though. The Ranger shifted away, letting the dead bulk slide on down the shaft into blackness. Hatfield clambered quickly up the rest of the way, to stand beside Collander in the open gallery.

"Magoon," said the Ranger. "Right between the eyes, Colly."

"Pure luck," Collander breathed. "But how did he ever miss me, Jim?"

"Your number wasn't up, I reckon."

"One more flight and we're on top."

Hatfield thumbed a match aglow, and lunged for the next ladder. "My turn to go first, Colly," he said, grinning over the blackened match stick.

CHAPTER VIII

Roaring Guns From Ambush

ONCE more Jim Hatfield and his young companion mounted cold crusted rungs in the foul smothering dark. Hatfield was in the lead now, with Collander climbing at his heels. Breathless and drenched with sweat, weary and aching in arms and legs, they worked their way up toward the summit.

For a wonder no one was waiting for them at the top. No guns went off in the Ranger's grimed, dripping face. The lighted interior of the shaft-house showed nearer and clearer as they toiled upward with gripping hands and thrusting feet.

No reception committee? Magoon had been left behind to take care of them, shoot them off the ladder. Like shooting fish in a barrel, they must have thought, but Magoon had missed his first fish, and Colly's snap-shot had caught him flush in the forehead.

They crawled up through the hatchway and flattened out in the shadows at the rear of the shaft-house. There were the furnace room, the boilers and engines, the elevator cage on its cables at the collar, and the huge water pumps. Ore cars stood on the tracks, and equipment, tools and gear littered the ground.

A clump of men stood near the front of the building—Deuce Scalzi, Perry Emmons, and the other two from below—talking with guards and workmen. The odds were pretty long, even for a Ranger, Hatfield thought wryly. Better wait till that bunch thinned out a bit. Some of them would be going down to look for Magoon, when he failed to appear on the surface.

Hatfield thought grimly, We're in a tight. Should have stayed below and gone out the way we came in. I let Colly's impetuosity overcome my better judgment. But damned if we're going to climb back down into that vile black hole! The workmen here probably aren't armed or paid fighting wages, but there are more than enough guards and gunfighters to wipe out two of us. If they spot us, we're cooked!

Deuce Scalzi and a half-breed gunny known as Navajo finally went to the grilled cage of the shaft car and descended into the mine to see what had become of the rear-guard, Magoon.

Hatfield motioned to young Collander and they began creeping toward the ore cars, utilizing all available cover and shadow, worming their way across the open gaps. The cars, much larger than those underground, stood with chocked wheels on inclined tracks that slanted from the shaft-house to the sorting bins and dump heaps.

They had almost reached the shelter of the cars, when Perry Emmons sighted them and cut loose with his hand-guns. Then all hell broke loose around the collar of the Queen High!

The searching hail of lead showered Hatfield and Collander with dirt, wood splinters, and stone- and steel-dust, pinning them down behind an inadequate barrier of stacked tools, wheelbarrows and timbers. They fired back at the blossoming gun flashes, scattering the enemy

into widespread cover, and the unequal duel went on.

The shaft-house became a roaring furnace of gunfire. It was a guess game of sight, trigger, and duck, as bullets whipped around them, chewing earth and wood, and howling off metal and rock.

Young Collander stood up to it like a veteran, shifting, and aiming his shots, unflinching beneath the savage scourge of flame and lead. He would make a Ranger all right—if he lived to get out of this hotbox. He'd make a fine companion for those other comrades Hatfield had left down in Texas—Milt Travers, Fox Edley, Red Bouchard, and the rest.

But right now Austin and Ranger headquarters were as remote at distant planets. Given time enough to fan out, Loftin's men would catch them in a crossfire, from which there'd be no escape!

"We've got to make that ore car, Colly," declared Hatfield as they shucked empty brass and refilled their cylinders during a brief lull in the warfare. "Unlock the wheels, get it rolling, and jump inside."

The rails were clear, below that car. With luck, they might ride it outside and get away in the darkness. The steel sides should turn anything except high-powered rifle bullets. Hatfield hoped none of the guards had a big old buffalo gun.

It was their only chance, anyway. If they stayed here, it was simply a matter of time. Miraculous, in fact, that they hadn't been hit already, with all that lead flying.

"We'll make it, Jim," Collander told him confidently. "They can't shoot worth a damn."

"Long range for Colts," reminded Hatfield. "It's the rifles that bother me some."

"Them guards can't shoot for nothing," the young prospector said scornfully. "If they was any good they'd have both of us down by now."

Hatfield smiled thinly. "Glad they're no good then, son."

Collander grinned back at him, thin face battered and warped. "Wish old Dad was here with that rifle of his, Jim. He'd show 'em some real shooting."

"We could use him, Colly," admitted Hatfield, adding whimsically, "But this is no place to wish a pardner of ours into."

"Reckon not. But Dad wouldn't mind. He's been wanting to get a crack at this bunch for a long, long time, Dad has. If he was younger, Dad Dubiel would've busted loose at them before now."

The firing began again, lashing their precarious position with scorching fury. They returned it to keep the enemy bottled up and nailed down as much as possible. They couldn't afford to give that killer bunch too much freedom of movement, or time to aim. Neither could they waste ammunition. Wide empty spaces were beginning to show in the brass of their shell belts.

Crouching, firing and weaving, the beseiged two worked their way nearer the ore car on the track. About thirty feet left to go now. Ten yards that seemed like that many rods.

Collander was grinning into the gunsmoke, when the grin froze on his broken young features.

"More of 'em, Jim!" he said, nodding at the open archway in the front of the shaft-house.

Horsemen were milling out there, three of them hauling out saddle-guns and dismounting to join in the battle, chasing their broncs away into outer darkness. One of them was Clay Loftin himself, big and immaculate, with a rifle swinging easily in his hand.

Standing back out of revolver range, Loftin began giving orders to his men inside. Immediately the tempo of combat increased.

With Loftin driving them on, the hired gunmen began moving forward, taking more chances, and exposing themselves here and there. Jim Hatfield caught one flitting form in the clear, and dropped it in the gravel. Collander knocked a rifleman down behind an upright post, but the wounded man crawled to shelter. In his anxiety to finish him, Colly reared up to draw a bead on the wriggling form.

"Down, Colly—get down, kid!" yelled Hatfield.

But Colly remained upright and aiming, to finish off the creeping guard with another shot.

Hatfield thought it was Perry Emmons who sighted around a pile of ties and slammed a slug into Collander, beating the lanky young fellow backward into a stilted stagger. Hatfield's own gun blasted then and splinters spouted into Emmons' pallid face as he ducked from view.

But beyond the arched entrance, Clay Loftin was taking cold, deliberate aim with his rifle. Colly was still reeling across open terrain when Loftin's rifle bullet ripped through his chest and laid him flat on his back. Jim Hatfield knew from the empty slackness of the thin body that he was dead, or soon would be.

Buck Collander never stirred again, but the pistol was still locked in his bony fist. The courageous young prospector was gone.

SHOCK, grief and rage erupted in the Ranger. His guns wouldn't reach Loftin, but he turned them loose on nearer targets, and saw at least two more men go down under his blazing fire. Then he was racing for the ore car, with slugs all around him, shooting out the far wheel-block and kicking loose the chock on this side.

A lunge set the heavy car in motion and it quickly gained momentum on the downgrade. Hatfield caught the rear end and heaved himself headlong into the empty iron body.

Lying breathless and spent on the gritty bottom, sick about Young Buck Collander, the Lone Wolf reloaded as the wheels clanked over the rail-joints with gathering speed. Bullets clanged and smashed and beat furious tattoos on the steel sides. None of the enemy had been near enough to catch the car, and running men could not overtake it now.

Loftin and his riders wouldn't have time to get their horses and pursue it either. For already the car was outside the shafthouse, rocketting down the slope past ore bins and on toward the dump at the end of the line. Stars and cloud-tossed moon soared overhead, and the fresh night air buffeted Hatfield's sweaty, blackened face as he stood erect.

The track leveled off, and the car slowed gradually as it neared the trestle over the high-piled dump heap. The shaft-house was far behind, and no pursuers had come into sight as yet. The luck of the Lone Wolf still held, but it hadn't been strong enough to save Buck Colly, whose young life had barely begun, a fine boy who'd never grow rich in the Gulch or get to be a Texas Ranger now.

Dead at the top of the Queen High silver mine, in the Trillon Mountains of Nevada. *For what?*

The moon sailed clear of a cloud bank and poured silvery radiance down the mountainside onto the luminous levels of Eldorado. Below, on the right, Hatfield could see the corral and sentry shack outside the tunnel they had entered, with his sorrel and Glorney's claybank waiting by the corral bars.

As the car clattered onto the trestle, the Ranger swung over the side and stood poised to jump on the outer ledge. It wasn't too far to the ragged mound of the ore dump. He leaped out and down with a winged flying sensation, sinking into the shalelike mass, sliding and wallowing down its steep far side. Above him the car went on until it crashed to a jolting stop against the bunkers at end-of-track.

Clear of the dump heap, Jim Hatfield jogged down the slope through brush, trees, and scattered pyramids of waste ore, all gilded with moonbeams. Escaping from that mine was like awakening from a nightmare, and the sense of unreality presisted, yet he knew the happenings were true enough.

Death was everywhere in Eldorado tonight. Gila Glorney crushed beneath that stampmill, and Sontag sprawled in the tunnel. Magoon dead at the foot of a ladder, and Buck Collander and others dead in the shaft-house on top.

But three of the men Hatfield wanted were alive and free—Loftin and Scalzi and Emmons! And he had a more personal

reason for taking them now since they had killed young Colly.

Hatfield had nearly reached Goldy at the outer edge of the corral when he glimpsed a flicker of movement beside the shanty. The moon was clouded over again, but the night was still light. A man appeared leading a horse, and the Lone Wolf identified the dim silhouette of Navajo, the breed who had gone down in the shaft car with Scalzi to check on the missing Magoon.

The gunman spotted the big Ranger at the same instant, and dropped the reins to claw at his gun. Hatfield's draw was a thing of fluid ease and speed, his Colt rising and ablaze before Navajo's barrel left the leather. The impact jarred the breed back against the cabin wall, his bronc bolting in terror.

PROPPED there on jacking legs, Navajo was striving to bring his weapon into line when Hatfield growled, "Drop it, man!" and the pistol slithered into the grass and weeds. Clutching his wounded side Navajo pitched forward, squirmed, and was motionless. Not dead, Hatfield thought, but out for awhile, and through fighting for this evening.

But where was Scalzi? The Deuce must have come out this way, too. Hatfield soon knew the answer.

Deuce Scalzi, mounted on a powerful buckskin, came charging around the corner of the shack like a saddle bronc out of a chute. Scalzi's gun was aflame as he drove straight at Hatfield who flung himself aside in a long, flat dive, twisting and firing from the ground as the horseman catapulted roaring by.

The up-angling shot struck and lifted Scalzi, until he was momentarily suspended in midair as the buckskin ran out from under him. Then Scalzi toppled to earth with a heavy thump. Jim Hatfield, up like a great cat, sprang to his side and stood crouched and waiting.

The gunslinger stunned by the fall as much as by the bullet, stirred and moaned. He had been hit in the left shoulder, Hatfield noted, as he unstrapped and yanked off Scalzi's gunbelt. The man's other pistol had flown somewhere out of his hand.

Well, Hatfield thought with satisfaction, here was one of his quarry who would live—and talk. But it wasn't wise to linger long with him in this vicinity now, though. Better get the Deuce down to Doc Barlow's at once!

CHAPTER IX

No Loyal Thief

HOISTING the unconscious Scalzi in his arms, Hatfield whistled up Goldy and draped the gunman in front of the pommel. Stepping up into the saddle then, the Ranger headed down the mountainside for the lights of town.

He couldn't bother with Navajo. The men from the shaft-house would find him and the trussed-up sentry soon enough, anyhow. Doc Barlow would have plenty of patients tonight, but Hatfield wanted to get Scalzi to him first.

Barlow was at home, for a wonder, and he greeted Hatfield and his burden sourly.

"I had enough troubles before you came here, Jimson. I don't need all this business you're bringing me, so don't be expecting any commission. I understand you hardly left enough of Gila Glorney to bury."

"You'll have others to bury, Doc," Hatfield said grimly. "But only one that I give a damn about. How's Dad coming? I don't want him to know right away, but they got the kid tonight."

"They killed Colly?"

Hatfield nodded sorrowfully. "He got a few of them first, though. I want this one in a private room, Doc, where none of Loftin's crew can find him."

"This way," said Doc Barlow. "I'm sure sorry to hear that about young Collander. Dad's sleeping right now. It's going to hit him mighty hard."

Hatfield put Scalzi down on the bed the doctor indicated. "Don't tell Dad until he's feeling better."

"I'll get my things and operate here," Doc said. He examined Scalzi's wounded shoulder and left the room.

Deuce Scalzi's eyes opened in the pock-marked ugliness of his face. There was venom in them as he blinked up at Hatfield. "Who the hell are you anyway?"

"A Texas Ranger," Hatfield said coldly.

"We'd begun to figure that. Where's the rest of 'em?"

"I came alone," Hatfield said.

"They sent one man—after *us*?" Scalzi couldn't believe it. "Well, what do you want of me, Ranger?"

"You're under arrest. I'm taking you back for trial. Without doubt they'll hang you in Austin, Scalzi. But first, you're going to do some confessing here, with Doc Barlow as a witness."

"Like hell I am!" jeered Scalzi.

"You'll talk," Hatfield said mildly. "Unless you want to lay there and suffer, maybe bleed to death from that hole in your shoulder."

For the first time, fear and panic showed in Deuce Scalzi's malevolent eyes.

"You want to hang alone, Scalzi?" asked the Ranger. "Glorney's dead already, but Loftin and Emmons might get away if you don't talk. Get away with all that wealth you've stored up. How'd you like that, Deuce? "

"They'll get away with that and Bethany Hickey too, Ranger, unless you stop them," Scalzi snarled. "They're going to hit for Idaho and that lava country up there. I'll talk—you're damn right I'll talk! They ain't going to get off that easy. If they pull out, they'll be headin' for the Idaho border and the Snake River. Remember that, Ranger."

"The poker game in which Loftin won the Queen High from Bob Hickey was crooked, wasn't it?"

Scalzi's thick lips writhed. "What do *you* think, Ranger?"

"I think Bob Hickey's going to get that mine back," Hatfield said. "I'm going to see that he does. With your assistance."

"I don't give a damn who gets it now," Deuce Scalzi said, shuddering with a spasm of agony. "Where's that whisky-guzzling horse doctor? This shoulder's giving me hell! Sure, I'll talk. Hickey can have his Queen High back. But I don't want Loftin and Emmons going free, and leavin' me holding the bag."

"We're going to put your confession in writing," said Hatfield.

DEUCE SCALZI groaned. "Put it anywhere you damn well please. Just get that damn drunken doctor for me, and don't let Loftin and Emmons break loose and light out of the country!"

"They won't get far," Jim Hatfield promised.

Doc Barlow came back into the room with his instruments and equipment.

"Doc," Hatfield said, "this patient is going to make a confession later."

Barlow frowned at him thoughtfully. "Just what is your real name, and your official capacity, my friend?"

"Jim Hatfield," the Lone Wolf said, and showed his Ranger's badge for the first time since he'd been in Nevada.

"I suspected something like this," murmured Doc Barlow. "I've heard of you, of course, and I'd tentatively identified you as the Lone Wolf Ranger. From the physical aspects of yourself and that sorrel of yours. It's an honor and a pleasure, Jim Hatfield."

Deuce Scalzi cursed petulantly. "To hell with him! Take care of me Doc."

"I'll do that, Deuce—if Ranger Hatfield so directs," Doc Barlow said. "You may have assumed an importance beyond your comprehension, Scalzi. . . ."

It was late when Jim Hatfield left the doctor's house, slipping out the back way to where he had left Goldy behind the shed. The Loftin wounded were being brought in the front way now, and Doc Barlow would be busy until daybreak.

Deuce Scalzi was sleeping under opiates, tied to the bed and locked in the private room. He had signed a confession that covered most of the major misdeeds of the unholy four in both Texas and Nevada.

He had, in effect, signed the Queen High back to Bob Hickey, but Hatfield wasn't quite sure as to what disposal he would make of the mine. Hickey had to sober up, straighten out, and prove himself before title would be restored to him, and Bethany come into her rightful inheritance.

Something satisfactory could be worked out. The thing to do first was get Clay Loftin and Perry Emmons, and make it a clean sweep, now that Gila Glorney was dead and Deuce Scalzi was a wounded prisoner.

The moon, cloud-hazed but brilliant was lowering in the western sky, and Eldorado was quieter than Hatfield had seen it before. He swung aloft on the sorrel, feeling as old and lonely as that white moon. Buck Collander was dead, Dad Dubiel and Arch Wallach were wounded, and Bob Hickey was virtually useless.

The Ranger was strictly on his own now, but his consolation was that Loftin and Emmons would likely break with their followers and make a run for it alone. They wouldn't want to share the wealth, and were probably pleased that Glorney was dead and Scalzi had vanished. A fortune split two ways was much perferable to one cut up in four pieces.

There always was little loyalty among thieves. And that always favored a lawman.

Hatfield rode toward Wallach's house in the unnatural stillness of the night, the scent of gunpowder and blood lingering in his nostrils. It had been a long and eventful night, following a long, busy day, and he was tired to the marrow of his bones. It was an effort to sit his saddle and to keep his eyes open. Which was not strange after an evening that had opened with a fracas at the Loftin mansion, followed by a duel with Glorney in the stamp-mill, then battles in the mine, the

A TALL TEXAS TALE

Well, Blow Me Down!

THERE are Kansas winds and Chicago winds, and many other windy spots on this earth, but when the boys are in the right mood after a good meal, no place in the world comes close to being as windy as a Texas ranch bunkhouse. It was just such an occasion when Shorty Adams loaded his jaw with plug-cut tobacco, and started out:

"You fellers all heard about the hen that laid the same egg half a dozen times against a strong tail wind, but I ain't never told you how I was blown inside out when I opened my mouth during a Gulf coast hurricane. Yes sir, it was right embarrassing till I could get my mouth open in reverse and get blowed right side out again."

"You're out of practice, Shorty," snorted Pappy Adkins. "Let me tell you about the gale that turned a Kansas windmill so fast it finally took off and made the first non-stop flight to Europe. That same storm blew so hard the sun couldn't rise and we had pitch dark weather for three days."

"Up till now," cut in Tex Watkins, "the truth's been taking an awful beating, but I aim to get the conversation back to reason and logic. I recall an Oklahoma gust that blew a dollar bill in and out of my pocket a dozen times afore I could slap a hand on it. During the same blowing spell the hawks just hovered up in the sky an the wind blew the chickens up to them. The grass was blown so flat and close to the ground the cows had to root it up like hogs. Why, I—"

But there was no need for Tex to continue unless he got a kick out of talking to himself. The boys had all drifted outside—it was getting too drafty in the bunkhouse.

—Al Spong

shaft-house, and outside the tunnel. Enough fighting for a lifetime crammed into several hours. Small wonder that Hatfield ached all over with weariness.

Lamps were still burning in the Wallach living quarters despite the lateness of the hour. Hatfield stepped down to take a look inside before unsaddling and stabling Goldy.

He sensed something wrong as soon as he entered the house. The furniture had a slightly disordered aspect, and the silence was eerie. Hatfield began to fear what he might find in the other rooms.

ARCH WALLACH lay on his bed with blood tracing his square face from a gashed scalp. He was unconscious, but not seriously hurt, Hatfield decided, after inspecting the storekeeper's head. There was no fracture or depression of the skull bones. The bed old Bob Hickey had occupied was empty and disarrayed, and Bob was sprawled half-senseless in a corner, gun-whipped, as Wallach had been. Bethany either had gone home to bed, or she was in Clay Loftin's hands once more.

Hickey blinked up as Hatfield brought a pan of water to bathe his lumped, bleeding head. "They got Bethany again," he said slowly. "Loftin and Emmons. They've gone, and taken her with them. They intend to keep her this time, the scurvy scum!"

"I'll get them and bring Beth back," Hatfield told him. "I've got an idea where they're heading for, Arch."

"So've I. Heard 'em talking. They thought I was out cold, but I wasn't, quite. They're bound for the Snake River country up in Idaho."

Hatfield nodded. "I'll start after them in the morning."

"We ought to start right now," Bob Hickey said.

Hatfield glanced over at him in surprise. "You're in no condition to ride, Bob. And I'm pretty well worn out myself. They'll be too busy traveling to harm Bethany tonight, and for some time to come."

"I'm sober, and I'm going to stay sober," Hickey said, with solemn conviction. "And I'm riding after them, mister. She's my daughter."

"But it's my job," Hatfield said. "I'm a Texas Ranger, Bob, up here after Loftin and Emmons. I've already got Scalzi, and Glorney is dead. Those four were wanted in Texas."

"I'm going with you just the same," Hickey insisted. "I can ride with anybody. I won't hold you back none." He got up, swaying on shaky legs. "Is Arch—all right?"

"Just knocked out. I'll fix up that cut and bump on his head. Go back to bed, Bob. We'll ride out in the morning."

"I don't want you sneaking out on me before sunup now. Word of honor you won't leave without me, Ranger?"

"Word of honor," Hatfield agreed. "We'll go together. You'll have to get hold of the best horse you can find, and a couple of good pack horses."

"One thing I kept was a damn fine horse, son. My big steeldust'll run most ponies right into the ground."

Hatfield was working gently on Wallach's lacerated scalp. "You know the country up that way, Bob?"

"I know it," Hickey said. "I've rode all over it. I know it well. We'll run them rats down. But I'd like to move out tonight."

"We'll do better to start fresh in the morning, Bob. I haven't had much sleep lately."

"I know—Beth told me," Bob Hickey said sorrowfully. "You and Arch spent a couple nights hunting for me. I been a pretty poor specimen, but that's over and done with. When a man gets so far gone he can't stand up and fight for his own daughter, it's time to change. I got to the crossroads tonight, feller, I could see it all plain and clear. Either I went on drinking myself to death, or I bucked up and acted like a man again. So I made the choice and I'm off the bottle for good. I'll stick with you on the trail if it kills me to keep up, and I'll fight beside you as long as I can lift a gun!"

"Glad to hear this, Bob," said Hatfield, with simple sincerity.

HE COULD see some traces of the man Bob Hickey had been at his best, and it was a welcome and heart warming revelation. A good man to ride the river with.

But after the dissolute life Bob Hickey had been leading, he was bound to suffer untold agonies on the trail, and there was no certainty that he could bear up under it. The fact that he was willing to try was something, though. It was enough, and it would make Bethany proud and happy —if she wasn't already broken by Clay Loftin and Perry Emmons, beyond any possibility of future happiness.

Finished with Wallach, the Ranger rose and said, "I'll put up my horse, then we'll get some sleep, Bob."

"Mind if I come out to get some fresh air?" Hickey muttered.

Hatfield smiled at him. "You don't trust me?"

"Hell, yes, I trust you. I just want a breath of open air, boy."

"Come on then. It'll do you good."

CHAPTER X

Pursuit

THE RANGER and Bob Hickey went out together to care for Goldy. Hickey was much impressed by the magnificent sorrel.

"That's a whole lot of horse, feller," he said. "Maybe my steeldust ain't quite his equal, but he's close to it, I figure."

"You sure Loftin and Emmons pulled out of town?" Hatfield asked him.

"They had pack horses and a bronc for Beth all ready to go," Bob Hickey said grimly. "They lit out all right. We'll pick up their tracks tomorrow."

"How's your head feel, Bob?" asked Hatfield.

"Hurts worse from the dope Doc gave me than from the gun-barrel. They didn't hit me too hard. It won't bother me any. If it aches, it aches. I'm used to that. It won't stop me. Nothing will, short of bullets."

"Well," said Hatfield, "You'd better favor your head till morning—get a little sleep. You may need a good head."

In the morning Jim Hatfield and Bob Hickey took the trail into the north, cutting what seemed to be the sign of their quarry—three saddle horses and two led pack animals. Hickey's steeldust was nearly as big, powerful, and fleet as the Ranger's sorrel, and from the livery they had hired two excellent pack horses which now were well-laden with supplies. It was apt to be a long, hard trek through the wilderness.

They left the Trillon Mountains that afternoon, crossing a stretch of blistered desert wasteland, driving steadily north and east. Hickey, ravaged by drink and dissipation, was suffering intensely all the way, but no word of complaint escaped his taut lips.

His being along slowed Hatfield considerably, yet he was glad of Hickey's company and determined to give the man a full chance to prove up and regain his self-respect. It wasn't likely that Bethany would be molested, at least not until the outlaws had carried her a long way from Eldorado.

Late in the afternoon, Hatfield became aware that they were being followed. Doubling back and climbing to the rimrock overlooking a narrow canyon they had recently traversed, the Ranger and his companion set up an ambuscade and waited, while the sun sank at their backs and the lavender shadows lengthened and darkened until the passage below was filled with purple and blue dusk. Presently six riders appeared, six of Loftin's gunmen who had been left behind to cut off pursuit from Mineral Creek. Their plan evidently was to wait until Hatfield and Hickey made camp and fell asleep this evening, then attack.

"We'll cut the horses from under 'em, Bob," the Ranger said. "Much as I hate to do it, putting those boys afoot is the quickest and safest way of getting them off our backs."

Cradling their carbines, the pair on the rim waited until the horsemen were almost directly below them, then opened fire. Two horses toppled under the first volley, spilling their riders as they thrashed about in the boiling dust. The gunmen blasted back at the rimrock, spraying the two men there with stone fragments and dirt, but they didn't have a chance for a clear shot at their ambushers.

Hatfield and Hickey, triggering and levering with speed and precision, raked the enemy with murderous fire. Two more ponies went down, kicking, on the bullet-churned earth. Their riders crawled to cover, shooting futilely at the rim. The remaining mounted men were torn from their saddles, their broncs ran away, and it was all over. The six gunnies, at least two of them wounded, were left horseless and helpless on the canyon floor.

"You haven't forgotten how to shoot, Bob," said Hatfield.

"I was missing more than I should've," Hickey said. "But it'll come back in time. I'm still a mite shaky, but I'll be improving every day."

"They must have had orders to trail us out of Eldorado," observed Hatfield. "Now, with them on foot, we shouldn't have any more trouble from the rear."

"We could've killed 'em all, I reckon," Hickey said. "But it was probably better to knock down the horses, although them broncs were a lot nicer people than the critters that rode 'em."

THEY rode on northward until they were well beyond the reach of the unhorsed enemy. Full night had come when they unsaddled and unpacked to make camp.

When the morning sun rose red as flame over the Wasatch Range of Utah, Hatfield and Hickey were on the trail again. Hickey was still in agony, but enduring it without a murmur of complaint, and gradually beginning to harden to the saddle.

The second night out they camped on the shore of Ruby Lake. The next forenoon they passed Franklin Lake. Had Hatfield been alone, he might have overhauled the Loftin party by this time, but it was impossible to travel fast until Hickey got toughened to the grind.

The third evening found them in Elko, a cattle and freighting town on the Humboldt River. Then they learned that Loftin, Emmons and Bethany had been there and gone on. The Ranger and Bethany's father enjoyed the luxury of hotel suppers and beds that night. Hickey was feeling much better now, with the alcohol burned out of his system, his eyes were clearer, his hands steadier, his body more relaxed and controlled.

From Elko it was still about a hundred miles to the Idaho line, but two days later they crossed that boundary.

The following afternoon, their sixth day out of Eldorado, they pressed on toward the Snake River. And sighted their quarry for the first time, at long range, with Hatfield's binoculars.

"Beth looks all right, Bob," said Hatfield, passing the glasses. "Some tired, but who wouldn't be?"

"They've spotted us too, Jim," said Hickey. "Loftin's got the field-glasses on us now. They're heading for Twin Falls on the Snake, I reckon. Might lay a trap for us in that town, or somewheres this side of it. Must surprise 'em some to see us. They figured those six gunsharps would put us under without any trouble. . . . They're moving on now."

"Can we catch them before they make the town?"

"Not unless they stop and wait for us. It's only about ten miles away now."

"They won't stop to fight with Bethany on their hands," Hatfield said thoughtfully. "They'll lock her up in town and try to gun us there most likely. Or they'll keep on riding— How far from the Snake to that volcanic country?"

"Maybe a hundred miles northeast of the Falls," said Hickey. "They call it Craters of the Moon, and it sure looks like something on a long-dead planet."

"They must have a hideout there," decided the Ranger.

"Must be. It's a good place to hole up,

if you can stand the plumb queer sights and smells. Nobody goes there unless they have to. Rivers disappear there, steam shoots up out of the ground, the malpais cuts hooves and boots to pieces, and the air is full of black ashes."

"Sounds real pleasant," Hatfield said, smiling.

"It sure is," said Hickey. "It looks like a country that hell wouldn't have."

They climbed back into saddles, the pack horses on lead ropes, and set off again to close up the pursuit. The Rockies of the Continental Divide loomed in unreal grandeur in the north and the east, vast soaring peaks of rock and snow, merging with the clouds. It was a beautiful land of infinite variety, Hatfield thought, a country of great sweeping distances and breath-taking vistas, one spectacle after another on all sides, at all levels.

Twilight lay gray and blue upon the earth and lamps were coming aglimmer when they neared the town of Twin Falls. They swung in an arc before entering the settlement, and saw the roaring white-spumed wonder of Shoshone Falls, where the Snake River cascaded some two hundred feet over a curved rim a thousand feet wide.

LEAVING their horses on the outskirts of town, Hatfield and Hickey sauntered forward into the Idaho community, keeping a sharp look out for the two killers they were trailing.

After scouring the town for an hour, they had seen no sign of Loftin and Emmons and their captive, no trace of their horses in the corrals or stables. Returning for their own horses, Hatfield and Hickey took them to a livery barn for care and rest. In the background was the ceaseless muted thunder of the waterfall, and its damp coolness pervaded the atmosphere.

Emerging from a barbershop session that included baths, haircuts and shaves, the two pursuers had supper in a restaurant, then wandered about the nighttime streets, still on the watch for the outlaw chiefs and Bethany.

Inquiries brought no satisfaction. Nobody in Twin Falls seemed to have seen a trio answering to that description. Apparently Loftin and Emmons had bypassed the town with their prisoner and pushed on across the Snake toward the lava wastes of Craters of the Moon.

"Well, we'll stay here tonight, and take after them again tomorrow," Hatfield said. "Our horses need rest, Bob, and we can stand one ourselves."

"All right,' agreed Hickey. "But I'd have bet ten-to-one that they'd stand and make a fight somewheres around here. All that wealth they're toting must have made 'em a mite timid."

"They know it's bad business to carry off a woman in this country, too," Hatfield said. "That makes 'em leery."

Across the street a tar-barrel flare illuminated the false front of McFarland's General Merchandise, and cast a garish glow upon passing prospectors, freighters, cowmen, and townspeople. All at once Bethany Hickey appeared under the wooden awning of the store. Weary and trailworn, she still had the bearing of a young queen, her tawny head held high as her dark eyes searched the thronged thoroughfare.

Bob Hickey saw his daughter and plunged across the street in her direction. Jim Hatfield, sensing a trap, tried to halt him, but it was too late. Hands on his guns, the Ranger strode after him, splitting his vision to watch the alleys on either side of the store.

It was no surprise when gun flames pronged bright and guns roared loud from the corner to his right. Bob Hickey dropped, rolling in the gravel as the slugs slashed his legs from under him.

Hatfield's Colts leaped into line and lashed fire at that cornice, chewing off splinters there. Hickey had a gun blaring before he ceased rolling in the dirt. The two snipers shot again and ducked back out of view, as Hatfield and his companion went on hammering lead at them.

Hatfield broke into a run, passing the prostrate Hickey and lunging into that

dark alleyway. But Loftin and Emmons rounded the rear corner before he could get another crack at them. Their horses were waiting behind the building, and when Hatfield burst into the back yard the outlaws were gone in a billowing dust cloud. There was nothing to target on, no way of checking or chasing them at once. But they had left Bethany behind, at any rate.

Hatfield reloaded and walked back to Main Street. Beth was kneeling beside her father, with a crowd gathering about them. It was easy to reconstruct Loftin's plan now. They had turned Beth loose, or let her slip away, in order to use her as a decoy. But the plot had backfired on them; at least they had lost the girl.

Writhing through the jammed ranks, Hatfield bent and lifted Bob Hickey in his arms. Someone directed him to the doctor's office, and Bethany followed him there.

"I ain't hit bad, Jim," protested Hickey. "But they got away, didn't they?"

HATFIELD nodded. "Not for long though. I'll run 'em down."

"Just burned my hip and ribs, I reckon," Hickey panted. "Won't be laid up long, Jim. Maybe I can ride tomorrow."

"You take it easy," said Hatfield. "We've got Beth back, and she's all right."

He glanced at her questioningly, and she inclined her gold-brown head.

"Yes, I'm all right. They didn't harm me. But I'm awful glad you're here. I'm so tired!"

While the doctor was treating Hickey's wounds, Hatfield rolled a cigarette and talked with Bethany. Unless they switched their plans, Loftin and Emmons were heading for the volcanic wastelands. They couldn't understand how Hatfield and Hickey had survived to track them all this distance. They were packing a fortune in gold dust and cash, which meant a lot more to them than Bethany had meant.

"They were sorry they took me, I think," she said, with a wan smile. "I just slowed them down, inconvenienced them on the trail."

A stocky man wearing a town marshal's badge entered, introducing himself as Marshal Tompkins and inquiring as to what the gunplay was about. Hatfield told him briefly, showing his silver-encircled Ranger's star and identifying himself and the Hickeys, as well as the fugitives.

CHAPTER XI

Craters of the Moon

MARSHAL TOMPKINS knew Hatfield by reputation, and he had heard of Clay Loftin and Perry Emmons. He offered to raise a posse and go after them tonight, but Hatfield said he had some personal reasons for wanting to take those two himself.

"It's up to you, Ranger," Tompkins agreed. "Hope your pardner's going to be all right, and the young lady here, too. I'll be around town, if I can do anything at all to help you."

"We're much obliged to you, Marshal," said Hatfield.

Tompkins shook hands again and made his departure.

Bethany looked at Hatfield gravely. "You really think Father's all right?" she asked.

"He's better than he's been in years, Beth, even with those holes in him," Hatfield declared. "He found himself again."

"Thank heaven!" she sighed. "He was such a fine man until he lost the Queen High."

"He's still the same fine man, now that he's come to his senses," Hatfield said. "And he's going to have the Queen High back."

He told her then about Deuce Scalzi's confession, and the other happenings in Eldorado. She was deeply grieved to learn about Buck Collander's death, but gratified to hear that Arch Wallach and Dad Dubiel were coming along satisfactorily.

The doctor appeared then to report that

Hickey's wounds were slight and shallow, and he'd be up and around in a week or so. He had one groove on his hip-bone, another along the ribs, but no bones were broken and both holes were clean. Hatfield and Bethany went in to see the wounded man a minute and say good night, before the doctor gave him a sleeping potion.

"You're sure you're all right, Beth?" Hickey asked anxiously. "Mighty glad to know that, little girl. And you've got a father again, I reckon."

"Yes, I can see that," Bethany murmured. "It makes me proud and happy, and I love you more than ever, Father."

Bob Hickey grinned at Hatfield. "Don't suppose you can wait a week for me, Jim? Well, you won't need me, that's sure. But I'd like to be in at the finish."

"You've done more than enough already, Bob," said Hatfield. "And the finish is my job anyway. I'll put out in the morning, and be back here by the time you're ready to ride home."

"Sure. Well, I've got a good doc—and a nice nurse. And I need a rest cure, after all that riding. But I hate to miss out on the show-down. Reckon that's what I get, though, for being bullheaded and running right into them bullets out there— Good night. And God bless you both."

Bethany and Hatfield left the doctor's and walked to the Shoshone House, where they took rooms, then chatted for a time in the lady's parlor off the lobby. Marshal Tompkins came in with Beth's saddlebags, and said her horse had been picked up and taken care of, after Loftin and Emmons had abandoned it in the back lots.

When they said good night at the foot of the staircase, Bethany clung to Hatfield's big hand and stared long and intently into his gray-green eyes. She was plainly ready to come into his arms, and in Hatfield was the strong urge to hold her close, but he resisted it with effort. That would lead to nothing but complications and heartaches. She was promised to Arch Wallach, and that was where she belonged. There was no place in his life for a lovely girl like Beth Hickey. Not yet anyway.

"Good night, Bethany, and rest well," he said gently. "Take care of Bob."

"We'll be waiting for you—and praying for you, Jim Hatfield," she whispered. Whirling, she almost ran up the steps, in spite of her exhaustion.

HATFIELD watched her out of sight, then walked into the hotel barroom. He needed a few drinks, to ease the tension and soothe his weariness.

He was on his third when Marshal Tompkins joined him, and Hatfield ordered for him.

"They're lining out for the Craters all right," Tompkins said. "I had a couple of boys check on their tracks, just to make certain. That way you can pick up the trace quicker and easier in the morning."

"I sure appreciate it, Marshal," said Hatfield. "We don't always get this much cooperation from local authorities, so far away from home."

Tompkins smiled at his glass. "I know enough about Loftin and Emmons to want them taken—or killed. And even if you weren't carrying that star, I'd figure you for a man to tie to, Ranger."

"Likewise, Marshal," said Hatfield, raising his glass to him. "If this wasn't such a private and personal deal, I'd like nothing better than to take you along tomorrow."

"I know how those things are," Tompkins said. "Sometimes a man has to do it all by himself, or it isn't any good. I've had cases like that myself— I've got a hunch you'll get them and come back all right. Wish you the best of luck anyway. If something *should* happen that you don't come back, Ranger—well, I'll see that Loftin and Emmons pay their score just the same."

"I'm obliged for that too, Marshal," said Hatfield.

They chatted over a few more drinks, then the Ranger bade the lawman good night and climbed the stairs to his room. . .

Two days and ninety miles northeast of

Shoshone Falls, Jim Hatfield was in the scorched black heart of the shattered dead volcanoes and giant lava beds that made up the Craters of the Moon country. A fantastic tortured land of incredible bleakness where neither animals nor plants could live, studded with lava dykes and volcanic buttes, honeycombed with potholes and hollows, spouting with steaming hot or ice-cold springs in places.

A weird nightmare terrain that laid a spell on horse and rider alike, as they wound ash-blackened over a crusted surface broken by outcroppings of malpais and lava rock. A dead world, hideous and grotesque, unlike anything that Hatfield had ever seen, it was all that Hickey had described, and worse.

Nothing grew there; nothing lived there. Only the two riders and pack animals ahead, and the single rider with his pack horse behind, moved across the twisted sun-blasted landscape. Hatfield was still on the trace, slowly but surely closing up on Loftin and Emmons, almost within rifle range at last. They had thought no one would be mad enough to follow them into these infernal wastes. But they had underestimated the tenacity of a Texas Ranger on the trail, particularly the Lone Wolf.

"It sure looks like hell burnt out and warmed over, Goldy," Hatfield murmured to his mount. "But where they can go we can go, and faster, surer and better. It's a country as black and cruel as their hearts, Goldy, and a fit place for them to answer for their crimes. They're beginning to pay now, Goldy, beginning to die a little."

For two more days this grim game of hide-and-seek went on, with Hatfield gaining steadily. The quarry was able to vanish for hours at a itme, but never able to lose him. Occasionally they set up an ambush, or attempted to circle back and surprise him, but something seemed to warn the big Ranger every time. He shied clear of the ambuscades, veered away from the traps, and kept Loftin and Emmons fleeing before him, cracking a bit under the pressure of pursuit.

BY DAY, the heat was wicked, the sun pouring down without mercy, searing and scalding men and beasts in its terrible glare. The whipping winds served only to stir up the furnace heat, and scour black ashes and dust from the lava crust of the jigsaw landscape. Hatfield's face and hands were burned even darker, and his split lips were eased only by wet leaves of chewing tobacco. Nostrils and throat ached with a tight, hot dryness, and the blowing dirt was a constant torment.

By night, the cold closed down with an ironhard clamp, freezing the flesh, chilling the blood, penetrating to the bones.

This terrible country corroded a man's body and spirit, and ate away at his sanity.

At times the chase had the unreality of a bad dream or utter madness. Then Hatfield was not riding alone, but surrounded by shadowy comrades. Collander and others who were dead rode beside him. He saw their faces, heard their voices, talked to them, as hoofbeats clopped over crusted hollowness.

Dad Dubiel and Bob Hickey were with him now and then, also, and sometimes Doc Barlow and Arch Wallach. When they left, there were Texas Rangers—blond Milt Travers and red-bearded Bouchard and lean Fox Edley. But they did not stay long. The mirages passed, and Hatfield rode alone.

On his third afternoon in the lava, five days out of the Falls in the Snake River, Jim Hatfield stood on a crumbling purplish ledge below Big Crater Rim, staring out over the bizarre convolutions of the dark sun-struck wastelands. The truncated cones of ancient volcanoes stood like blasted pyramids, their gaping summits strewn with rubble. Below them the warped lowlands were studded with lava dykes and buttes, pitted with ragged potholes and steaming crevices.

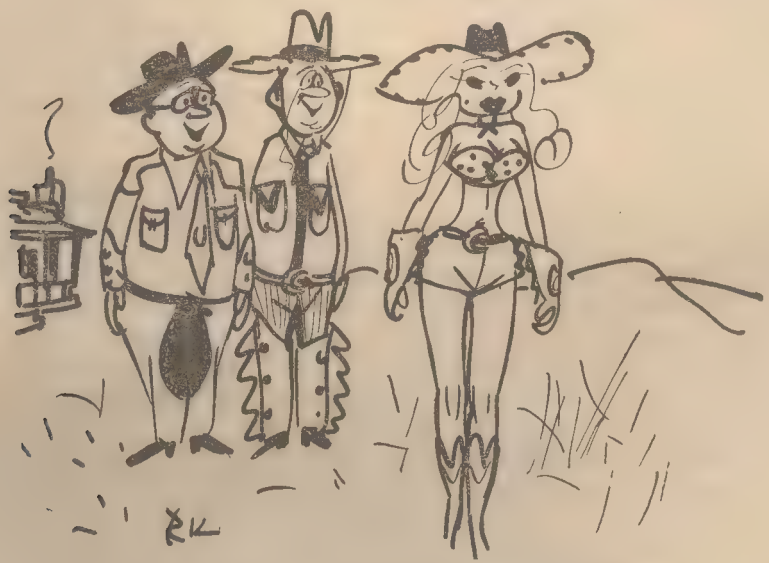
Down there Loftin and Emmons were doubling back once more in another desperate effort to bushwhack the Ranger. Hatfield had anticipated this move, and was waiting now for the enemy to come within range of his rifle. If he had guessed correctly, they would skirt the base of

these black cliffs, almost directly underneath his vantage point, and the terrain was so rough between the lava walls at this junction, so full of crevices and fissures, they would be unable to flee at any effective speed. They would have to quit their saddles and seek the nearest cover to make a fight of it at all, otherwise they would be sitting ducks.

Their nerves were cracking under the prolonged stress and strain, Hatfield felt uncomfortable in his filthy sweated clothing, plastered with lava ash and thick dust.

His unshaven jaws itched with beard stubble, and his lips were parched, sore and gashed from the blistering enervating heat.

The canteen water was so warm and brackish it scarcely soothed his swollen tongue and taut throat. The memory of that last barbershop bath at the Falls was



"I hope she comes to the campfire tonight. Boy, can she toast marshmallows!"

thought. They wanted to get it settled as much as he did. They probably had expected that Hatfield would be satisfied and turn back, once the girl was rescued in Twin Falls. Not many lawmen of their acquaintance would have followed two gunmen of their reputation into Craters of the Moon. But nothing seemed to daunt, stop, or even slow this towering Ranger on the golden stallion.

Hatfield waited now with the same Indian patience he had displayed on the trail. Goldy and the pack horse were at the rear of the shelf, safely out of the way of flying lead from below. The Lone Wolf maddening, the acme of luxurious well-being and civilized living.

It had been a long and bitter chase, but it was going to end here at last, at the bottom of Big Crater Rim, in a setting of erupted old volcanoes, gnarled lava formations, and ancient evil smells. Jim Hatfield might die here, although he refused to concede the possibility.

But Clay Loftin and Perry Emmons were doomed, regardless of what else occurred today.

They would never surrender, so they would have to die!

Jim Hatfield waited for action.

CHAPTER XII

Natures Graveyard

NOW the horsemen on the broken black surface below appeared larger, clearer and closer, the men and mounts sooted jet-black with ashes. Hatfield caressed his carbine and waited, quiet and relaxed, chewing slowly on the tobacco that eased his dry lips and mouth.

There was nothing elegant about Loftin and Emmons at this stage, he noted with mild satisfaction. They looked even more miserable, dirty, ragged and exhausted than Hatfield felt. He made a final adjustment of his sights, and jacked a shell into the firing chamber.

He reflected, I wouldn't have believed there was a country like this, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. The boys down home will think sure I'm lying, when I tell them about Craters of the Moon. I had read about this, too, somewhere, but you can't really credit it until you see the burned-out peaks and smashed craters.

He had come to Nevada for four men, but he had realized from the start that these two, Loftin and Emmons, were the worst of the lot, if there was any choice. Glorney had been their muscle man, Scalzi their gunhand, but these two were responsible for all the men ruined and killed, all the women ravished and wrecked in their travels from the Gulf of Mexico up to the Trillon Mountains of Nevada.

Loftin and Emmons were behind all the depredations and destruction. More, *they* had killed young Collander in the Queen High shaft-house, and wounded Bob Hickey in the street at Twin Falls. The shooting of Dad Dubiel and Arch Wallach had been authorized by them. They were the ones Hatfield wanted all right.

The distance and angle were about right now. Hatfield sighted down the blued barrel and squeezed off, purposely overshooting his mark, as a warning. He fired twice in swift succession. Loftin and Emmons immediately realized the hopelessness of trying to ride out of this trap with its precarious footing. Both pulled free their saddle guns, slid from leather and ducked behind a jagged upthrust of lava rock. They began to shoot from cover up the cliffside at the gunsmoke that marked Hatfield's position.

Under geysers of powdered lava and stone, the Ranger shifted to another spot on his lofty rampart, and went on pumping lead down the sheer slope. When his carbine clicked empty, he withdrew from the rim, reloaded his rifle, and headed down a steep switchback trail along a series of ledges, running in spurts, with a deceptive weaving stride.

Bullets hummed about him and screamed off the rock wall, raising black fountains as they ricocheted, but he continued the perilous descent, unhit except by stinging rock fragments.

On the last horizontal shelf before the bottom, Hatfield noted that only one rifle was working below him now, and he caught a fleeting glimpse of the death-mask visage of Perry Emmons behind that barrel. Clay Loftin had pulled back into better cover, apparently into one of those subterranean caverns that opened in back of the lava outcrop.

The saddled horses and the pack animals had wandered beyond that escarpment, and would not be too hard to round up in the natural confinement of that area.

Leaping forward from one debris heap to another, Hatfield drew fire from Emmons and returned it with interest. A final thrust of the descending platform overlooked Emmons' hiding place and made it untenable. When Hatfield emerged on that terrace, carbine at the ready, Perry Emmons slid out of his now useless cover to face his dogged pursuer.

THEY blasted back and forth with rifles, flames spearing through shadow and sunlight, reports echoing off the palisades of lava rock, as fast as they could squeeze off, jack in fresh shells, and line

and trigger again.

Hatfield felt the slugs scorch and tug at his clothes, but Perry Emmons was struck solidly, jolted backward, and flung into a twisted, shrunken huddle on the malpais. Emmons, with three gaping bullet-holes in him, hemorrhaged and sobbed his life out quickly over his now forgotten carbine.

Clay Loftin appeared in the steaming mouth of an aperture and fired one shot at the Ranger, but Jim Hatfield was already jumping and skidding to the bottom, racing forward behind intervening columns and outcroppings. Loftin withdrew into his underground passage.

Hatfield's rifle was empty once more. He left it leaning on the slab that had served as shelter for the outlaws, and went stalking on with a Colt in his great right fist. Down an incline drifted with dirt and ashes, into a dim foul-smelling corridor beneath the earth's surface.

Loftin's voice sounded from the depths, and Hatfield froze into a recess in the wall:

"Is Emmons dead?"

"As dead as you're going to be, Loftin."

"Wait—I'll make a deal with you," Loftin called. "There's enough money to last us both the rest of our lives."

"Only one deal left for you," Hatfield said. "Throw out your guns and come out with your hands up, Loftin. That way I'll take you back to Texas alive, you and Scalzi."

"You are a Ranger then?"

"That's right. A Ranger named Jim Hatfield."

Loftin's voice lashed out with scorn, "You fool! There's more money here than you could earn in a dozen lifetimes with the Rangers."

"I want you, Loftin. I'll take the money, too, but not for myself. That's incidental. You're what I came after."

Clay Loftin laughed mockingly. "Come and get me then, you hopeless moron! If you insist on dying here, I'll oblige you."

"I'm coming," Hatfield told him, cold and contained, sidling forward once more along the dark winding passage, with light showing vaguely ahead. The place was eerie as a tomb.

"One more chance, Ranger!" shouted Clay Loftin. "Will you listen to reason? Make yourself rich for life?"

"I don't want anything but you," Hatfield called back. "Dead or alive, Loftin. Which will it be?"

"Come on in and die then, you lout!" jeered Loftin, his voice and laughter reverberating off the craggy walls.

The corridor opened abruptly into a large cavernous chamber, with daylight raying thinly through slits in the high ceiling. Stalactites hung like giant ebony icicles overhead, and an odorous steaming chasm opened in the lava floor at the far side.

The labyrinth ended here, and Loftin was somewhere in this vast glomy cell. In places the black stalactites extended to the floor, like grotesque columns in a chamber of horror. The air was rank with the stench of ages, rotten ore and minerals, and death.

Staying in the shadows Hatfield waited motionless, Colt poised in his right hand.

"I surrender!" Loftin called. "I'm coming out! Don't shoot!"

Hatfield did not speak or stir. There was a flickering movement behind a thick weird pillar, and flame torched at the Ranger with a terrific roar as Clay Loftin came out shooting with both hands. The slugs chipped stone splinters at Hatfield's back, the ricochets screeching in his eardrums. Holding firmly on those muzzle flashes, he fired, the gun leaping in his grasp.

LOFTIN rocked back against a crooked column. Sagging there, he struggled to lift his pistols, but they exploded on a downward slant, raking up ashes and stone dust between the two men.

Hatfield pulled down from the recoil and pressed the trigger again, smashing Loftin against that stalactite. Bouncing and slipping sideward from its support, Loftin reeled on jerking legs to the brink of that gaping smoky breach in the lava floor. Heaving back and spinning around

there, like an unbalanced dying top, Loftin fired blindly with both hands in the Ranger's direction.

Hatfield leveled off and let go once more, and the flame of his shot seemed to stab Loftin backward. Tottering on the edge of the chasm, Clay Loftin uttered one strangled scream as he fought for equilibrium, then he was gone, dropping instantly from sight into the vaporous depths of that crevice.

Jim Hatfield stood listening, but there was no further sound. Nothing but the rising steam, the swirling powder smoke, and uncanny stillness. It was as if Clay Loftin had never existed.

Numb from shock and reaction, chilled to the spine and shaking now that it was over, Hatfield turned and stumbled out of the corridor on trembling legs. The open sky had never looked so good, and fresh air had never tasted better as he climbed to the surface. Even the Craters of the Moon were beautiful to his eyes, after that underground horror.

Hatfield got Goldy and the pack horse, and brought them down the slope to the bottom. He soon caught up the animals of the fallen outlaws, hitching them with tandem lead lines, and then stripped Emmons' body of money-belt and pocketbook, for identification purposes more than anything else. He couldn't carry Emmons back, and he had neither the tools nor the inclination to bury him. This was nothing but a vast graveyard anyway. The dead were more at home here than the living.

In the saddle, his Colts reloaded and sheathed, his carbine refilled and booted under his leg, Jim Hatfield turned Goldy toward the Snake River, with the pack horses and outlaws' mounts on lead lines behind them. Another campaign ended, one of the longest and hardest on record. . . .

BETHANY HICKEY and her father were waiting for him at Twin Falls on the Snake, and Hatfield was eager to get out of this volcanic waste and back to them. They would ride south together as far as Eldorado, where the Queen High was waiting for Bob Hickey, and Arch Wallach was waiting for the girl.

When Dad Dubiel recovered, he'd go back to working his rich claim on Mineral Creek, lonesome without young Buck Collander, but pleased to have made his big strike at last. Doc Barlow would go on drinking his whisky and attending to his gunshot cases, but there'd be fewer of those now that the Loftin bunch was out of business. And Eldorado would be a better place to live in, thanks to the Lone Wolf.

As for Jim Hatfield, once everything was cleared up and straightened out in the Trillons of Nevada, he would just take his prisoner, Deuce Scalzi, and start the long homeward trek to Texas and his next assignment.

"We settle things for lots of other folks, Goldy," he drawled, "but we never seem to get settled down anywhere ourselves. We just go on rolling along and ramming around the country, like a couple of fiddle-footed drifters . . . But I reckon we're doing what we were meant for, at that."

LOOK FORWARD TO—

THE OUTLAW NOBODY KNEW

An exciting Jim Hatfield novel—in which a mysterious will-o-the-wisp outlaw known as Cordele leaves no trail

By JACKSON COLE

•

Coming Next Issue—Plus Many Other Stories and Features!

WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

The Indians used the juice of the bloodroot for dying their garments and handiwork and in making their war paint. A sad way to dye, it would seem, even for an old-time redskin who wouldn't be caught dead undyed.

Colorado derives more income from its sugar beet crop than from its gold mines. Which is a mighty sweet item, though we doubt it will win any metals.

Hunting Horse, the Kiowa Indian chief who was a scout for General Custer, died last summer at the age of 107 in Saddle Mountain, Oklahoma.

Four centuries ago Coronado, the Spanish adventurer, took possession of the western part of the United States and thereby extended the Spanish empire by half a continent. But his exploration trip was denounced as extravagant and foolhardy because he failed to find the seven fabled cities of Cibola whose walls and streets were reputed to be plated with gold.

Little did anyone realize at the time that the land would one day be worth many times the value of the gold he expected to find, to say nothing of the insignificance of the journey's expenses as compared to the wealth of the area discovered.

The trumpeter swan was believed to be extinct until a flock of 76 was found in Montana. We point out that a few of these could have been trombonists in disguise, though we don't point very loudly.

Marvin Glenn, Arizona's best known mountain lion hunter, went on a hunt in the Chiricahua Mountains to show off his prowess for the movie cameras. So what happens but one of the felines he was preparing to lasso charged him, mauling and scratching him up enough to send him to the sidelines for several days.

Moral—in dealing with mountain lions it is safer to turn your prowess about, leaving your sterness to the fore, and then make tracks the other way, but very rapidly.

The spines of the cholla, a prickly cactus of the Southwest, only become imbedded deeper in the skin when you try to brush them off. Reminds us of a couple of mothers-in-law we once heard of.

Falfurrias, Texas, was named from an Indian word meaning "the land of heart's delight," whereas Texas itself is another Injun word meaning "friends." Which should give you a rough idea, most likely.

NOT ONLY the

The woman would probably get them both scalped, Clay Drumm thought — but without him she would have no chance at all

DARK SCALPS

a novelet by W. J. REYNOLDS

CHAPTER I

Guide Wanted

CLAY DRUMM sat tipped back in his chair on the hotel porch, boots on the rail, and watched Mobley and Navajo, two of Tankman's scalp hunters, from under the pulled-down brim of his hat. As he watched them cross the street and disappear into the Hoolihan Saloon, a savage hate showed briefly in his gray eyes.

For two weeks he'd been hanging around this little town of Junction, New Mexico Territory, hoping for the chance to tail Mobley and the breed to Tankman's hideout. But the pair showed no signs of leaving.

They had displayed momentary interest in a few of the small outfits in the east-west traffic. They were scouting some outfit that the remnant of Tankman's gang could handle, but the shirt-tail outfits weren't rich enough for the trouble, and Tankman didn't have enough men left to handle the bigger outfits.

Too bad the Apaches hadn't done a better job, Clay thought. But the Indians hadn't done badly; they'd chopped up two-thirds of Tankman's renegades, many of them ending up on an ant hill with their eyelids missing. Tankman couldn't have many men left; four-five maybe.

Clay became aware of a girl moving up to him, but he didn't move. She had come in on the stage from Lordsburg last night, and had asked for Clay Drumm immediately. Clay had deliberately refrained from looking her up in her hotel room, knowing that he couldn't help her whatever she wanted of him. He had his own job ahead, and had to be ready to leave town on the jump.

"Mr. Drumm?"

Reluctantly, Clay came to his feet, removing his hat. "Your servant, ma'am."

Clay Drumm fired at the renegade chief

Calm gray eyes with darker stars radiating from the centers met his own, and Clay felt a jolt of uneasiness before her fresh beauty and expensive clothes. He was at once painfully aware of his own nondescript appearance — faded and patched levis, brush-scarred jumper with much of the left sleeve gone, black hair ragged and reaching the collar of his jacket.

"Ma'am?" he mumbled, and cursed himself for his scattered wits.

Her softly curved lips widened into a smile. "I'm Ann Temple. St. Louis." She held out her hand and Clay took it briefly, gingerly. She said, "You were recommended to me by an old friend of yours—Mr. Wyatt Earp, of Dodge City. He said you hunted buffalo with him one season. You had a ranch near Lordsburg, he told me, and said that you might help me, or help me find someone."

CLAY had himself in hand now, and he said, "Just what did you have in mind, ma'am?"

"I must go south to Quito, in Mexico. I need a guide, someone who is capable, dependable, and who knows the country. I want you, Mr. Drumm, and I will pay you five hundred dollars."

His brown face showed only a little of his surprise. He said softly, "Miss Temple, that's a hundred and seventy miles of Apache country, and laced with renegade white men and Mexican bandits. What you need is a troop of cavalry."

"Will you take me, Clay Drumm?"

His gray glance whipped over her expensive clothes again, over the smooth face that would turn raw under the desert sun. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, ma'am. My advice to you is don't try it."

Her lips tightened. "You think I'm a tenderfoot. Let me assure you that I can keep up with you. I can ride, and I can shoot. I *must* go, and there's only one way to do it—horseback. Someone will take me. I believe the pay is enough, isn't it?"

"More than enough, ma'am." He looked at her levelly. "Somebody will take you, ma'am, for that kind of money." She knew what he meant, for color flushed her face as he went on quickly, "It's none of my business. But don't do it. It's not worth your life. Even if the Indians or renegades didn't run onto you, any men who would try to guide you couldn't be trusted. I know only one man who might try it, who could be trusted. But he's gone to Tucson and won't be back for a month."—

"You won't go?"

"No."

She stiffened, then said, "Good day, Mr. Drumm," and swept away to re-enter the hotel.

He resumed his seat, unaccountably moved and uneasy. Some damn fool idea she had, probably with a man mixed up in it. Clay Drumm wanted no part of it. He had his own chore ahead.

Suddenly he stiffened, then went loose again in his chair. His lips moved a little as he cursed whatever rottenness it could be in him to make him even think of using that girl as bait to come up with Tankman. But once the idea had been rejected, he looked at it calmly.

He didn't know what she wanted, but she had money. He would merely have to drop a casual remark about the five hundred-dollar fee and the rest would be easy. Mobley would get it as it swept the town, and, like the others, he would immediately assume that if she could afford such money for a guide, she had plenty, and probably a lot of it with her. A rich haul for scalp hunters down on their luck.

That would make him, that would make Clay Drumm, about as bad as the scalp hunters themselves. To hell with it! He got up and went up to his room, and lay down on the lumpy bed to take a daytime nap while he had the chance.

But he couldn't sleep. At the end of two hours he got up, splashed water into the basin, and washed his face. He couldn't keep his mind off Ann Temple, her fresh beauty, her square little chin. She had said she was going, and she would. She would be like that. She was looking for a guide. The word would get around. Mobley would jump at the chance.

Cursing himself for a fool, Clay Drumm hurried out of the room and downstairs. At the street door he froze, as he heard Mobley say:

"A cinch, ma'am, for a man who knows Apache ways, and the country. I can get you there mighty easy. You'll never set them purty eyes on an Injun with me guiding you."

Clay didn't catch her return as his own thoughts damned himself for letting her in for this. The least he could have done was hunt somebody to help her, and to have kept it quiet. But he knew no one who could go with her who could be trusted.

HE STEPPED through the door onto the porch. Ann Temple stood stiffly before the lounging Mobley who was devouring the girl with his black eyes, mouth in a loose grin. His greasy buckskins smelled to high heaven.

There was apprehension in the girl's face, but a hard determination, too. "Well," she said to Mobley hesitantly, "I don't know. I must have someone. I hope that Mr. Drumm will reconsider—"

"That saddlebum," Mobley sneered. "Hell, ma'am, he couldn't guide himself out of the county!"

"I have reconsidered, Miss Temple," Clay said bluntly. "I'll take you." His gray eyes were suddenly dark and savage as he looked at Mobley. "Get out, you stinking scalp hunter!"

"By God!" Mobley yelled, and reached for his gun. "I'll—"

Drumm hit him with a looping right that landed soddenly against Mobley's neck and jaw. The vicious blow seemed to stretch Mobley's neck upward before his body followed his head in a sprawling fall into the street. Drumm hit the dust beside him, jerked the dazed Mobley to his feet and slammed another fist into his belly, and brought his left up in a teeth-loosening wallop to his chin. He didn't even bother to unload the six-shooter near Mobley's hand. He turned back to Ann Temple who stood open-mouthed on the porch, and held out his arm.

"If you'll do me the honor, ma'am, we'll talk in the lobby."

She took his arm almost meekly, and with a wide-eyed stare, before she dropped her glance and walked with him into the hotel lobby. Men there grinned at him and lifted their hats politely to Ann Temple. When Clay guided her to a deserted corner of the lobby and seated her in a chair, she was smiling secretively, mostly with her eyes.

"You're a sudden man, Mr. Drumm," she said, the smile again in her eyes. "Please let me know when I start displeasing you, so I can mend my ways."

He grinned, a little sheepishly. "That was the worst feller you could of got hold of to guide you. He's a damn—a renegade scalp hunter. He'd of murdered you before he had taken you ten miles."

Her eyes darkened, and he saw her try to conceal her shudder. "Thank you, Mr. Drumm. But did you really mean it—about taking me?"

"Yes, if you still want to go, after I explain." She nodded, and he went on, "That Mobley is a member of a scalp hunters' crew led by a vicious outlaw named Tankman who has a hideout south of here in the desert. Mobley and a breed they call Navajo are here scouting something for Tankman, some party they can raid and kill. If you had gone with Mobley, and he hadn't kept you for himself, he would of taken you to that hideout, and they'd have taken your money, and killed you—after a month or two."

Her face paled and she said weakly, "I see. And these scalp hunters—they're Indians?"

"White men. After Injun scalps. Mexican ranchers pay 'em for every Apache scalp they can take. So much a head. To make it worse, Mexicans have black hair just like the Injuns do, and the scalp hunters take them, too, for usually Mexicans are easier, being farmers or sheepherders or such. There are other folks who have black hair, too, Miss Temple, and Tankman will raid an American ranch as quick as he will a Mexican one." His face went hard and savage with hate, and he saw

the girl's eyes widen in fear. He said quickly, "Sorry, ma'am, but it's true."

She nodded, and wet her lips. I don't doubt you, Mr. Drumm, but how does that affect—me? This particular trip."

"Mobley knows now that you've got money. He's been looking for somebody like that. He'll either follow us or head for Tankman and get the gang. They'll be looking for us. And the way those renegades know the desert, it will be one hell of a job to keep away from them!"

"I understand," Ann said, and he saw the determination harden in her face. "But I must go. I've been too long now. I *have* to go!"

"All right. We'll leave after dark. You got a horse and gear?"

"No. Will you attend to that?"

CLAY nodded, and she opened her reticule and counted out five hundred dollars in gold. Then she looked at him questioningly.

"How much will you need for the outfit?"

"Two hundred. I'll bring back what's left. You'll want a real horse, and he'll cost money." She gave him the money and he said, "Go across the street to the Chavez store and tell Maria I sent you. Get levis, boots, and a tough shirt and hat. Tell her to make a pack with a week's supply of grub for two. I'll get the horse and call for you after dark. Better sleep for awhile, too, if you can. You'll need your strength."

She stood up as he did. "Mr. Drumm," she said, "I'll need a side saddle." Her face reddened. "I have riding clothes."

His face hardened. "Miss Temple, you hired me to do a job. I'll do it, and you'll do as I say, or hunt you another man. That's final."

Their eyes met, gray on gray, and he thought for a moment she was about to go dignified on him. Then surprisingly, she smiled even as the color ran high on her face.

"All right, Boss," she said and, turning away, moved unhurriedly for the door and into the street.

CHAPTER II

A Reason for Bitter Hate

DRUMM stared after Ann Temple a moment before his hard lips softened in a grin. She might do to take along, once she got onto the ways of the country.

He glanced at the hotel clock, noted the time as eleven o'clock, and moved into the street. He'd get the horse and saddle, grain the mount and his own, and get a little sleep himself. Across the street, he saw Mobley's hate-filled eyes glaring at him before the renegade moved back into a store doorway.

He didn't see Mobley again as he went on to the livery barn where he bought a stocky bay gelding and a light saddle for Ann. He stabled the horse with his own and left instruction for both to be fed again just before dark. He went back to the hotel, lay down again and this time he slept.

An hour before sundown, Clay rose, washed, and went out to eat. Knowing what was ahead, he ate to repletion, then went to check the horses. They were eating a generous ration of grain.

He asked the hostler, "Mobley and the breed rode out yet?"

"Half hour ago," the hostler said, and slanted a look at Drumm.

Clay grinned at him. "Don't worry about it, Sid. Just checking."

At dark, he saddled the horses and led them around to the alley behind the Chavez store. He knocked, and was admitted by the huge Maria who beamed at him.

"The señorita, she is ready!" she said, pointed, and chortled.

Clay stepped into the room and stopped, staring. Then a wide grin split his face and he said softly, "Wow!"

Ann Temple stood stiffly in the center of the room, her face flushed, but she held his gaze. She wore a stout chambray shirt that concealed but shouted of what

it hid, and levis snugged her hips like a glove, flaunting the perfection they covered.

"Can you move," Clay asked solemnly, "without busting something?"

She took a step forward, hands clenched at her sides. "You—you insufferable—" She whirled abruptly, back to him, but across the room a small mirror showed him her face, and the tears squeezing from her eyes.

He was instantly contrite. "Shucks, ma'am, reckon I oughtn't to've took the liberty to josh you. I'm sorry."

She dabbed at her eyes. "All right."

"I wouldn't have had you wear clothes like that if I didn't think they give you a better chance of getting where you're going. We got hard riding to do, and maybe hiding to do, and they're best for that kind of business."

Some of the stiffness had gone from her when Maria went over to her and clucked gently. "The señor is right," she murmured. "He knows best. It does not hurt for a good man to admire, señorita!"

Ann turned, studying Clay Drumm's face, trying to see if falseness were in him, but evidently she saw only concern, for she smiled a little. "All right. I'm ready when you are."

"Let's go then," he said. He slipped the gold eagles into Maria's hand. "Yours, *querida,* if I do not return."

Outside, he helped the girl mount, adjusted her stirrups, then mounted his own big black.

"There's a rifle in the saddle-boot," he said. "It's loaded and ready. It's a Henry. You know how it works?"

"It's the kind I learned to shoot with," she said.

They rode silently out of the alley, skirted the few scattered houses, then rode on into the ghostly darkness of the desert.

This could be it, Clay thought. This could be the time when he would see the man he wanted—the yellow-eyed Tankman, the murderer who sold scalps for money, and any black-haired scalp would do. Even the scalps of children.

INSTANTLY the savage, hating rage was in Clay Drumm again, and his teeth gritted as in his mind's eye he saw the smoldering ruins of his ranch buildings, the mutilated bodies of the two Mexicans who had worked for him, the three Mexican children—and the body of his own six-year-old son. Scalped and hacked as the Apaches would do it.

But it hadn't been Apaches. His German housekeeper, a blonde, had been scalped and mutilated, too, but Clay had found her scalp later on the trail where it had been thrown away. A cowboy had seen Tankman's gang ten miles south of the Drumm ranch. The tracks of their horses had shown them to have been shod with rawhide, dried on in Apache fashion.

After talking to the cowboy, Clay Drumm had lost the trail in Mexico, being forced to flee some real Apaches. He had drifted back into the States and had been trying to pick up word of Tankman when he had heard that the Apaches had set a trap and nearly wiped out Tankman's gang. Tankman had laid low since then, damn low, as though the earth had swallowed him. But Drumm had spotted Mobley and the breed, Navajo, and had stuck to them, hoping to get a lead on Tankman.

He might have that lead now. Mobley, after being crossed in his personal plans for Ann Temple, would hit the road for Tankman's camp. They would be waiting for Clay Drumm and Ann Temple down there in the desert.

It relieved his conscience some for him to tell himself he would do his level best to get Ann to her destination first, before he attended to Tankman. The renegade wouldn't be far away at any time. He probably would be on their tails all the way to Mexico.

Abruptly Clay's black pointed his ears ahead toward a dry arroyo and a thick clump of brush and catclaw. Instantly Clay left the saddle, hooking the black with a spur. The big horse snorted and leaped as a shotgun bellowed from the arroyo bank, the streak of fire tunneling at the black's saddle.

Clay Drumm hit the ground and rolled

to his knees, his guns coming out and bursting into a drum roll of sound. He patterned that spot with eight slugs, and knelt there, guns ready to fire again.

A six-shooter blasted twice there, but Clay saw the streaks of fire slanted downward. The girl was holding her frightened mount ten yards away.

"Clay!" she cried. "Clay Drumm!"

A man coughed from the brush, and a figure lunged there, crashed into the brush and pitched out loosely. Clay's straining ears, still ringing from the burst of firing, caught the bubbly, jerky breathing.

Shot to hell, he thought, got to his feet and went to the form lying there. He struck a match and looked down into the lax and dead face of Mobley.

Back in the brush a horse snorted, then a rataplan of hoofbeats faded southward.

Clay thought grimly, The breed has gone to Tankman. Mobley had to make one more try for the girl and the money she's carrying.

But the breed was gone, and he would get to Tankman a hell's sight sooner than Drumm and Ann Temple could make the same distance.

Clay reloaded his guns, his face hard and set. Hell was to pay now, and the devil was heating the pitch. He walked back toward his horse.

"Mr. Drumm!" Ann cried. "Clay! Are you all right?"

"All right," he said.

He caught his black and felt him over carefully. The mount had not been hit, but there were several deep gouges in the saddle where buckshot had passed.

Drumm mounted. "Let's go."

"Who was it? Is he dead?" Ann's voice was strained, scared.

"He's dead. It was Mobley. He still wanted you, I reckon."

"Aren't you—going to bury him? Notify someone?"

"He was a buzzard himself. Let them take care of him. We haven't got time. I might as well tell you. That was the breed who got away. He's heading for Tankman, who pretty pronto will make his try for us. We can't beat him, but we can try to get past him." His voice went hard and rough again. "Worse luck."

THEY rode on for half an hour, then Ann said hesitantly, "You seem terribly bitter toward Tankman. Your face goes—savage when you speak of him. Have you got something personal against him? Other than a normal hatred for what he is?"

He was silent for a moment, then said, "He raided my ranch. He and his renegades murdered and mutilated every living human being there, hacked them up and scalped them like Apaches. To sell the scalps in Mexico. Including my six-year-old son."

"Oh, no!"

He told her about it then, his voice a monotone, level and full of hate. When he paused she moved her horse close to his, and her hand was feather-light upon his arm. The act moved Drumm strangely, and eased the bitter hate in him for a little.

"Was your wife—Did they kill her too?"

"She died when little Clay was born." He was silent for awhile, then said abruptly, "I might as well tell you, I thought of using you for bait to lure Tankman out. But I didn't. I was afraid to promise to take you, afraid I'd use you, anyway. Then Mobley heard, and wanted to take you. I took you away from him because you would have had no chance at all with him. I'll kill Tankman if it takes me the rest of my life, but I'll do my best to get you where you want to go first."

"I believe you, Clay Drumm, and thank you."

They rode hard, once the horses were warmed up, and when he finally pulled into a brushy draw that led upward into rugged, upended rock mountain, Drumm estimated that they had covered nearly fifty miles. In the first light of dawn, he off-saddled, staked the horses on the sparse grass, and gave each a ration of grain. He smoked while they ate, then watered them sparingly from one of the big canteens.

Ann Temple was asleep, with the limpness of complete exhaustion, when he went back to the camp, and he silently prepared a meager meal of cold biscuit and bacon. He finally managed to shake her awake long enough to eat, but she was sleeping again before she had finished.

Finished with his own meal, Drumm took his rifle and climbed high onto a rocky ridge. He scanned the rugged land with careful gaze, but saw no movement other than a faint feather of dust far to the south. Navajo, maybe. The breed would think nothing of killing his horse.

Seeking the shade of an upthrust shelf of rock, Clay lay down and slept. The sun woke him two hours later, and he spent another half-hour looking. This time, far to the west, he saw a thin, nearly invisible finger of smoke. Apaches. He watched the smoke and eventually saw another in answer, farther south. Relieved, he slept again.

It was mid-afternoon when he again took up his vigil of looking, and this time the signals he saw were different. Heliograph. The cavalry! That could be either good or bad, Clay thought, watching the flashes. If they didn't chase the Indians this way—

He left his post, fed the horses again, gave them the remainder of the water in the canteen, and half of the second one. That would give them another small drink around midnight. By morning, or some time before if they made good time, they would make Iron Springs. He could only hope that Apaches or Tankman weren't there when they arrived.

His lips pulled away from his teeth. He wanted no part of the Apaches if he could avoid it, but Tankman—

Clay Drumm let the thought come forward in his mind, and admitted to himself that it had been there right along, nagging at him. Tankman would know they would have to have water, and that Iron Springs was the only place they could get it. Still, though he hadn't put the spring there himself, he would try to get past it. If he couldn't—

Clay Drumm shrugged.

CHAPTER III

"They've Got Her!"

BACK IN camp, Drumm found Ann Temple awake, pan bread made and bacon sliced. She smiled at him, and she was lovely to Clay Drumm, even with her eyes slightly puffed from sleep.

"I thought I'd wait and let you make the fire," she said. "I'd smoke up the country probably."

He built a smokeless fire and she set about cooking, moving stiffly. Clay knew she must ache in every joint, with every muscle a pain. But she was dead game and tried to conceal her discomfort behind a smile. They ate, and he went for the horses while she stowed the gear. He saddled and tied the horses, with a glance at the half-hour-high sun.

"We'll wait for dark," he said.

He hunkered down, rolled a smoke and applied a match. She came and sat down gingerly near him. He grinned.

"You won't notice the soreness after the first week!"

She laughed ruefully. "You're right. I'd be dead long before the week was up! I want to retract that confident statement I made to you. I can't ride!"

He chuckled. "You did all right. Besides, you're riding like a brush-jumper instead of like honest folks!" His eyes were full of honest admiration and he blurted, You'll do, ma'am, and you'd make some feller a mighty fine wife!"

He felt the heat in his own face as her cheeks flushed, but her eyes were grateful. "Thank you, Clay Drumm. It takes some of the sting out of what I figured you thought of me. You think I'm a fool for coming, don't you?"

He ground out his cigarette, his eyes hidden behind his hat brim, concealing his real thoughts. He admitted, "Maybe I had some such sort of notion, ma'am, but I can take it back, I reckon! You got a good reason, likely, and I'm getting paid!"

He grinned. "I guess we're even!"

Her face was sober. "I have got a reason. At least it's a good one to me. My brother is in Quito. I have to get to him. I have nine thousand dollars I'm taking to him. We'll use it to start a ranch. He says it'll be enough. It'll be a new start."

Drumm said, "He was in trouble back home?"

"Yes. He embezzled ten thousand from an insurance company, and—and shot one of the officials when he was caught. I sold all our property and paid back the money and—and got the charge down to attempted manslaughter. It took a long time. I should have been here two months ago." She looked at him, wholly earnest now. "I *have* to get there, Mr. Drumm! He was broke the last I heard, and Frank is—weak. He might do something desperate again."

"He could," Clay said noncommittally.

But he was thinking. A black sheep brother who gambled away his money and property, then embezzled from his employer. Then his sister had to sell hers to try to keep him away from the hangman. Now she was running to him with what she had left, risking her neck and worse, a hell of a lot worse, to help him again.

He came to his feet. With a woman like this even half a man couldn't help but succeed.

"Time to ride," he said.

He set a slow pace at first, gradually increasing the speed to allow Ann to limber up. No word of complaint passed her lips, but he knew she was in actual pain. But as he steeled the pace into the tireless trot of the cow ponies, he told himself that for her to fall to Tankman or Apaches would hurt a lot worse.

He stopped at midnight, off-saddled, gave the horses the remainder of the water, and drank himself from their own depleted water supply. By squeezing it, they could make out until tomorrow, but the horses could not.

He sat down beside Ann who had sunk gratefully to the ground. He felt a deep tenderness for her, an aroused longing that shook him with a strange intensity. This girl would do, and the frontier would be no deterrent to her, once toughened to it. She would enjoy it.

HE SHOOK his head, as though the physical movement would help shut such thoughts from his mind. A man with a mission such as he had set himself concerning Tankman could bring only more burdens to this girl who appeared to have her share already.

He stretched his stiff legs gently, thinking the girl asleep until she said, "Mr. Drumm?"

"Yeah?"

"After—after you settle with Tankman, what do you intend to do?"

"I still have my ranch," he said. "Maybe I'll go back, or maybe I'll ride over the hill. Lots of country over there, they say."

"I heard that Cochise was about to make peace. Then there'll be only that medicine man, Geronimo, to capture. Won't it be a good country then, Clay?"

"Yeah."

"I— I think I could like this country. Under different circumstances."

They were silent then. Clay felt that she had left unsaid her purpose in starting the conversation, but did not dare let himself think of it the way his heart urged him.

Eventually he got up, saddled, and brought up the horses. "Time to go," he said.

She sat up and he gave her his hand and she came stiffly to her feet. She staggered; and his arm slid around her, steadying her. But the contact of her body was like a physical jolt and his arm tightened. She turned and was against him as his arms tightened, and her own went around his neck. He kissed her and felt the response of her lips, as fiercely demanding as his own; warm and eager.

They broke away then, both shaken and not trying to conceal it. He helped her onto her horse.

She said softly, "Does that change anything, Clay?"

"Just our personal desires, Ann. You

hardly know me."

She laughed softly, "I don't, do I? Or you me."

"Doggone it, Ann," he said tightly. "I won't ask a girl to marry me, and me with a head full of revenge. Nothing can keep me from getting Tankman, nothing short of death for one of us. He ain't fit to live! He ain't a man, but a low sort of animal."

"I agree with you. And I have something to do, also. But will you promise me something, Clay Drumm?"

"Name it, Ann."

"When—you are free, will you look me up?"

"As quick as horseflesh can bring me," he promised.

Her hand was soft against his cheek. She bent in the saddle. "Clay, kiss me again. Then we will go."

He did, gently, humbly, and his hands shook as he climbed into the saddle. They rode out of the brush as a thin old moon cleared the rocky terrain to the east.

They rode another two hours before Clay began watching for landmarks in the increasingly rugged land. An hour later he saw it, a thin spire lifting from a rocky canyon, shining faintly in the dim moonlight. He closed the distance to a quarter of a mile, and reined into a heavily brushed pocket in a jumble of huge boulders.

"Spring yonder, Ann. I'll scout it first." He dismounted, helped her down and gave her the reins. "Keep these plugs quiet. It's over two hours till daylight, and I might be gone most of that time if I see anything suspicious. Just be quiet and keep your fingers crossed."

He removed his spurs and faded silently into the ghostly darkness.

It took Clay Drumm a half-hour to reach the mouth of the shallow canyon where the spring was located, and another half-hour to close in on it, wiggling on his belly, taking advantage of the thickening brush and grass as he neared the water.

A JACKRABBIT came from the shadows at the spring, then another. Both of them stopped frequently to waggle long ears, scenting, and listening for danger. Clay moved in faster then, knowing no one was at the spring.

He drank from the yard-wide bowl of water trapped in the rocky basin, and once his thirst was quenched, he felt gently around the edges, locating the print of horses there. He sought the droppings, and broke them, testing for moisture. Several hours old. Probably late last evening.

A tingle of warning ran through Clay. Anyone coming here toward night would either stay here or some place close by, unless there was a mighty good reason to make tracks. Tankman would be in such a hurry, but it would be to reach Clay Drumm and the girl. The renegade would know that they would have to water up here, and would lay his plans accordingly.

Clay went stiff, then pressed his ear to the ground, listening with all his power. Unmistakably came the pulsation of horses moving, fast. And even as he picked out the tempo, the sound became fainter and fainter.

Horses, several of them, and going away in a hurry!

A chill raced up Clay Drumm's back, and the hair on his neck stiffened. A gun came into his right hand, and his left picked the bowie knife from his belt. Tankman had outsmarted him. The scalp hunter had been waiting out there in the desert, ready for Clay Drumm to leave Ann and scout the spring.

Now Tankman had Ann Temple!

He was sure of it, and his curse was a furious breath behind his clenched teeth. He slid away from the spring, hugging the shadows along the wall, ears straining, eyes probing the shadows of rock and brush. The warning was strong in him and he did not ignore it.

Tankman had Ann and her money! But he would do this with thoroughness in his usual bloody-handed way. He knew that Clay Drumm was looking for him, and he would know why. He would take this opportunity to rid himself of the threat of Clay Drumm. He would have left

men here to take care of the rancher after they had the girl.

Ahead was a patch of sandy soil, open and taking the full light of the moon. Beyond the spot of bare soil was brush, and on Clay's side the rock wall. He would have to cross it, and whoever was watching, would close in to this spot, the perfect place to pick him off.

Suddenly Clay froze in his forward movement as his hand touched cloth and a hard arm. But the pause was fractional. He drove forward, knife flashing, driving downward. Then he went still, shocked.

The man was dead. Stiff!

Clay Drumm felt the flutter of his heart, the racing warnings in his spine. Had that been movement yonder in the brush? He'd made some noise—the sound of a blow.

His lips pulled away from his teeth then, and gently he slid the stiff body ahead of him, inching it into the moonlit sand, the hat jammed on an unresisting head.

Gunfire burst abruptly from the brush twenty feet ahead, and Clay heard the bullets striking in the dead man's body; meaty, jarring sounds. Clay gritted his teeth, flipped the dead man over and groaned shiveringly. He inched backward a little, and lifted his .44s to bear on the brush.

Again the guns blasted and bullets jerked the dead body a little. Clay waited, his hate a pressure in his throat.

The brush moved. A man stepped cautiously into view, and a second man followed him. One said, "He's buzzard meat, let's get the hell out of here."

"We'd better scalp him and the other'n," the other man said. "Look like the Injuns done it. Hell, Drumm's head is black. His scalp will bring even more than his brat's did!"

CLAY'S lips pulled back in an animal snarl. He aimed his right-hand gun and fired twice. Not waiting to note the hits, he shifted the gun and emptied it into the other man. The scalp hunter leaped with a startled shout, and died even as his own gun hammered a shot into the earth.

The first man Drumm had shot was bawling in fright. His arms flopped uselessly, broken at the shoulders. He ran screaming into the desert, lunging blindly forward.

Clay Drumm shoved his gun into holster, shifted the other, and drew his knife. He plunged forward after the running man, shoved his gun into his waist band, and brought the renegade down in a lunging dive. He drove a knee into the man's belly and pressed the point of the knife against his throat.

"Now, you murdering renegade," he snarled. "Start talking! Where's Tankman taking the girl?"

"Go to hell!" the man panted. "You'll never find them!"

CHAPTER IV

Battle at the Hideout

FOR a moment Clay Drumm hesitated, the knife point against the man's throat while his instincts rebelled against his thoughts. But here was a killer, uncounted times over, an animal that killed women and children for his whisky and other dissipations. A scalp hunter.

There was another now who was dear to Clay Drumm—Ann Temple—and she was in the hands of killers like these.

Drumm shifted his position a little, then ground his knee violently down on one of the broken shoulders. His hand muffled the shriek of pain that burst from the renegade's mouth. He waited a half-minute, allowing the man to regain his wavering senses. He nudged the shoulder again.

"Talk, feller, or damn you to hell, I'll jerk that arm off!" It was said through his teeth, in a bitterly calm fury. "Talk!"

"All right!" the man gasped, and cried out with great sobs of pain. "All right, don't do that again, Drumm, for God's sake!"

"Speak up!"

"Hideout is west, ten miles. Red butte with scarred top. Around base of butte there's a break in the rock cliffs, trail up that to hideout. Man on guard at turn in passage."

"Where's your horses?"

"For God's sake, Drumm! I'm dying—bleeding to death! Tie me up—"

"Nobody tied up the men you've murdered, the women and kids!" Clay snarled. "Or my son!" he added grimly. "The horses. And who is that dead man back there?"

"Horses in an arroyo near where you left—the girl. That man at—spring—her brother. He was near dead with thirst when he staggered into camp—yesterday. Tankman used—hot knife blade to get it out of him—after Navajo got here. Hunting—sister. Supposed to be in—Junction. Tankman shot him—"

Clay drove the knife blade deep, came to his feet. He lifted the dead Frank Temple and moved away back toward the outlaws' horses. He found them near where he had left Ann Temple, and lashed the dead man's crumpled body on one of them tightly. Ann would want him to have a decent burial if they came out of this. If they didn't come out, it wouldn't matter. He mounted and spurred away to the west, leading the other horse with its grisly burden.

He rode hard, not sparing the rested ponies of the scalp hunters, and with him went the smell of Tankman's unsettled dust. Long before he had covered the distance named by the scalp hunter he was straining his eyes, trying to pick out the butte with the scarred top. If that man had lied—

Clay pushed the thought out of his mind.

A half-hour later he sighted the butte, its top thrusting upward and lighted by the coming dawn. He thought he could make out a moving spot at its base. Tankman maybe.

He made his slow way around the butte's base, keeping a sharp lookout for the rift in the ragged cliffs to his left. In the growing light, he could see the tracks of Tankman's horses now, and with their direction, he located the rift and turned toward it without hesitation.

The guard there would be expecting the other two renegades along behind Tankman, and he had their horses. It would still be dark in the passage. He hoped it would be dark enough.

He rode boldly into the passage, and began the upward ascent, the horses scrambling hard in spots, making a clattering racket. Drumm drew his gun, then replaced it and drew his knife. He slumped loosely in saddle, clinging to the horn as if hurt.

When he came to a bend in the passage, and then a wider spot that had been worn away by the stream that had cut this spot ages ago, a voice suddenly rapped in the rocky rift:

"Shag?"

The voice came from the narrow cut where the trail started upward again. Drumm hung to the saddle, knowing the man couldn't see him distinctly. He groaned briefly, keen eyes watching from under the brim of his hat.

"You hurt, Shag? Hell, did he shoot up both of you?"

Boots rattled rocks and the guard came forward, holding a rifle, slanted upward.

CLAY DRUMM weaved in the saddle, slipped well down the side of the horse and grunted again. The guard jumped forward as Clay slid on to the ground, hanging to his horse. As the guard reached for him, Clay came around, the knife driving.

He lunged at the guard, locking an arm around the fellow's neck as the knife sank to the hilt under the upflung left arm. The guard yelled hoarsely, and his rifle cracked, making flat, hammering echoes against the rocky walls. Drumm bore him to the ground, and held him there until he went limp. Then he was up and running up the passage. He would have only moments now before the renegades would be at him with a hail of lead.

He scrambled up the steep passage, and abruptly the walls fell away. Ahead was

the hideout. It was mostly a series of ragged shelves, a long dead lake bed that had cut the passage to drain itself. This two-three acre bowl was covered with brush and sparse grass. A brush and pole shack was against the back wall and a corral of similar material near it, holding several horses.

As Drumm flattened against the wall behind a projection of rock, he heard shouts from near the shack, and saw the renegades there, guns in hand, looking toward the passage. There were three of them. One, a huge, black-bearded man in a red flannel undershirt, slick with grease and dirt, he recognized as Tankman. Another was Navajo, and the third man was a wiry little man named Runt Canton.

They stopped some twenty-five yards from the shack and about seventy-five yards from Drumm.

"Taggert!" Tankman bawled. "Taggert, what the hell you shooting at?"

It was now or never, Clay Drumm thought, lifted the rifle and fired, his target Tankman's red shirt. But the renegade chief jumped off the shallow drop to a lower shelf even as Clay fired, and he missed.

Instantly the three scattered like quail, and Drumm jacked the rifle furiously, firing at Canton as the little man raced for shelter. The wiry renegade was disappearing into a rocky, brush-covered patch there when a bullet knocked him down. He scrambled up and Drumm put a final bullet into him even as he dived for the cover. He rolled in a loose ball. Drumm snapped his last shot at Navajo as the lean breed disappeared into a ditch.

Tankman, who had flattened himself on the brushy shelf and wriggled ten feet away to a wash that afforded him cover, opened up at Clay Drumm, his bullets hammering into the passageway, wailing off the rock walls and whipping in vicious ricochet around the avenger.

Drumm dropped the rifle and pulled one of his .44s. As Tankman slacked fire, Clay leaped from the wall and charged in a hard run for the brush ahead. Navajo opened up, too, and even with the distance, his bullets howled dangerously close. One skimmed a raw mark along Clay Drumm's jaw.

Then Drumm was in the brush and, without slackening, he closed in. Tankman began firing again with Navajo. Their lead made hard, snapping rips through the brush.

Clay glimpsed the red flash ahead there a hundred feet, and snapped two shots at it. Tankman bawled a curse, then roared, "Navajo, flank him! Get around him there, damn you!"

The breed was silent, and Drumm lay low, gasping back his breath from the hard run, and stuffing two new loads into his gun. He had to force this fight, get it over now. If one of them made the shack, and got hold of Ann they would have him.

His straining ears could pick out no sound, and the lifting sun made tricky light toward Navajo. Then Drumm caught a faint sound from where Tankman had been, farther away. The damn renegade was pulling back, making for Ann!

Drumm was taut, knowing he had to move but not daring to because of Navajo there to his left, sneaking silently in. There was a thin stretch of brush toward Navajo where water spilling off the ragged shelves, had uprooted it, and he watched there, squinting into the sun.

A FINGER of brush moved a little at the far end, and Drumm flattened, gun slanted at that spot. A black braid of hair showed there fleetingly, then again, with Navajo's black eyes this time looking from behind a hump of rock. Clay Drumm fired three times.

Navajo reared upward, his gun blasting blindly, then heeled around to fall loosely. Instantly Drumm was plunging through the brush toward the shack, bearing away from the spot where he had seen Tankman last, though knowing he would no longer be there.

Then he saw Tankman. The renegade chief had circled, making his way back toward the shack, but he was still closer to it than Clay Drumm was, running for

it in great strides. Drumm fired his last three shots from the .44 at Tankman. The renegade broke stride for a second then ran on, empting his gun at Drumm.

Drumm dropped his gun, shifted his left one to his right and raced for the shack. Tankman had almost reached it now, snapping a pair of shots at Clay from his second gun. Clay Drumm saw he was beaten, and stopped, jerking up his gun. He fired three times, but missed, then Tankman dived headlong through the brush side of the shelter.

Drumm jumped forward, closed on the shack and went through the side as Tankman had done. He hit the floor with a breath-taking jolt, saw Tankman rolling to his feet near the bound figure of Ann Temple. Tankman's gun blasted, and Drumm felt the bite of lead in his neck. He emptied his own gun in a burst of sound, and heard the click of Tankman's gun mingle with his own.

Tankman whipped out a foot-long scalping knife and lunged at Drumm.

Clay rolled to his feet, his own knife coming into his hand, and met the renegade's charge head-on. His left hand closed on Tankman's knife wrist, stopping the drive of the wicked blade just short of his own ribs. He felt Tankman's iron grasp on his knife wrist. Then they stood chest to chest, Tankman's filthy beard brushing Drumm's face.

Tankman went lax suddenly, throwing Drumm off-balance. Instantly the renegade wrenched his knife free. Clay tried desperately to ward off the quick drive of the blade, but he felt the bite of it in his side, and heard Ann scream.

Then he brought up a knee in a vicious drive to Tankman's groin, and as the renegade doubled up with a hoarse scream, Drumm wrenched his knife free and drove the blade to the hilt in Tankman's side. He slammed the renegade chief backward, pulling his knife free in a ripping slice.

Tankman fell with a scream, and Drumm followed, boot driving to Tankman's knife hand in a sharp, snapping sound. The knife fell from the man's broken wrist, and Clay Drumm closed on him, knife against the man's throat, knee holding the renegade down.

Yellow eyes glared in frenzied fear as Drumm pressed the knife point an inch deep into the bulging neck.

"This is for my son, Tankman," Drumm gritted. "You murdering buzzard!"

He pressed the knife steadily, burying it in Tankman's throat, then pulled it out, ripping the man's head half off. Blood gushed, and Tankman's bubbly scream came with the mighty arc of his body. Clay Drumm stepped back, and watched Tankman flounce around on the floor, then finally become limp and still.

Drumm stood there swaying, suddenly dizzy, and conscious of the fiery burn in his own side where Tankman's knife had cut, and of the warm blood that ran down his leg into his boot.

"Clay!" Ann screamed. "Clay!"

"I—I'm all right, Ann," he said and suddenly sat down.

"Clay, cut me loose so I can help you!"

HE BENT forward to place his hands on the floor, and crawled to her. He worked the knife between her hands, concentrating with all his might, and passed out as the ropes parted.

Clay Drumm woke with a clear head, and felt the thickness of bandages on his side and another on his neck. He turned his head a little and saw Ann beside him.

She said, "I found Frank, Clay, and—and buried him the best I could. Was he—was he with them?"

He shook his head and told her what the renegade had told him. "They killed him from pure viciousness."

Later, after she had made a bowl of soup for him, he said, "Ann, where will you go now?" He plunged on, not waiting for her answer, "I've still got my ranch, Ann. Do you think you would—that you could share it with a rough cowhand?"

Her hand was soft upon his stubbled cheek, then she pressed her face against his. "Yes, Clay. I thought I was going to have to twist your arm to get you!"

● ● ●

Black watched the boy as he scuttled about the clearing

LONG TRAIL HOME

By PETE CURTIS

REX BLACK stepped out from behind the tree when he saw that the rider was a kid. They looked hard at each other and then the rider's eyes cast a furtive scrutiny about the camp.

"Light," Black invited. "That horse needs a blow."

The rider swung down, almost stumbled to his knees. Black leaped forward. He reached out a restraining hand. "Whoa, pard," he grinned solicitously. "Better get boots to sod before you start walking."

He helped the stranger to the fire. "Been riding like hell." It was a kid's voice, all right.

"Just squat a spell," Black told him. "I'll tend your horse."

Seconds before, Black had felt the isolated serenity of these night-clad pine hills. The contentment they had given him was a rare and wonderful thing. He had come back, after many years, to a land where he was born and reared, where he figured he might find peace and solitude. He had kin in this territory, too—

The kid brought trouble to the outlaw—

a posse and a few ghosts from the past

an older sister married to a rancher named Farley Myers. Black vaguely remembered that marriage ceremony. He had been just a kid then.

Family life—that was the way to live. He yearned for such a life now—a wife, kids and his own cattle spread. He was free and clear. The law wasn't hounding him any more, and his own reckless and wild ways were something that belonged to a youthful past.

And now this younker riding in, trouble spurring his back-trail. There was no mistake. Black could read the sign clearly.

He squatted near the weary rider. The young fellow ran fingers through sweat-damp, sandy colored hair, wiped sweat from his smooth face with a sleeve.

"Thanks for looking after my horse," he said to Black. "I'm plumb rode out."

"That's all right," Black murmured. "Hungry?"

The other glanced at Black's hard, weather-whipped but friendly features. "You bet," he said quickly. "Ain't had nothing since morning, just some old black jerky I got from a Mexican sheepherder."

Black rose to his feet. "Well, no wonder you're all tuckered out. How does beans and bacon sound to your growling belly?"

Uneasiness was in Black, and as he prepared the grub, he asked casually, "What's chasing you, kid, and how far back you reckon they are?"

The younker tensed, eyes suddenly frightened. "Ain't nobody chasing me, mister. I'll just eat a mite of grub and ride out, if you want."

"No need to get roweled," Black grinned. "Just trying to make sure you don't lead the wrong gents in here. Me and some others don't cotton up too well."

The boy's expression changed swiftly then, and eagerness was in his voice. "You mean the law?"

Black said, "Maybe." He stared at the other, his eyes thoughtful and enigmatic.

The boy, feeling certain that he had found a sympathizer, said quietly, "They're about three or four hours ride back." Then, in a disgusted tone, "Oh golly, mister. My sign will lead 'em smack into here. Never thought of that. Sorry—"

"Forget it," Black assured him. "They won't read sign till morning."

"Yeah. But I kept busting the brush, feeling like they was hot on my neck." He laid back, propped on an elbow. He combed fingers through his hair with futile motions. "Oh hell! Sometimes I wish I was home."

Instant shame flooded the boy, and his gaze dropped.

Black's smile was friendly and sincere. "We all get that feeling sometime or other, kid, and the longer you ride lobo-style, the more you'll find it so."

HE WATCHED as the boy wolfed down a heap of beans and bacon. Neither of them spoke until the boy had sopped up the last of the gravy and stretched back with a big sigh. Black asked, "How old are you, kid?"

"Almost sixteen."

"You seem a mite young to be trailing the black hills, feller. Where's that home you mentioned?"

The boy grinned sheepishly. "Ain't too far a piece. Sure got a hankerin' to see it. My ma and pa—well, I never run away or anything like that. My ma and pa are pretty nice folks—"

"I'll bet they are," Black murmured. "How'd you set tracks to the owlhoot, anyway?"

"Oh, thought I'd give it a fling," the boy answered with a heavy sigh. "But to tell the truth, mister, I'm near on my last leg, and just aching to see the home roost. Town called Stoneville some miles down the canyon—I come from a spread north of there. Been gone some two weeks—looking over the country, camping trail-side, till I pulled that fool holdup!"

Black's eyes sharpened with interest. "Holdup?"

"Yeah. I tried to stick up the Bitter Wells stage, but the danged driver cut a whip to his team and went a flying. The shotgun guard peppered back at me and I

got cold feet and took off for the hills. Been all-fired lonely and scared these last few days. Don't know how my uncle stood it all these years. Reckon I just ain't cut out for this kind of life—"

Black queried, "Your uncle?"

"Sure," the kid explained. "Always felt high and mighty having an uncle who's famous! Everybody in our section knows about him being my uncle. My ma kind of shames up when anybody talks of him, 'cause he's her brother. She always hushes me up. Figured I wanted to follow his ways, but his life ain't for me. No sir!"

A hollow feeling started creeping into Black's belly. "Who is your uncle?"

"Oh, you've heard of him, all right," said the boy proudly. "He's Rex Black!"

Outwardly, Black did not register his astonishment, but for what seemed the profoundest moment of his life, he sat staring at the boy. His shocked mind mulled over the fantastic coincidence. He had been planning to visit his sister, but now. . . .

His eyes looked bewilderedly at the livid coals of the fire. The younker was puzzled, and he stated, "You sure must have heard of him, mister."

Black took a long time answering. "Sure," he said softly.

The boy was excited now. "You know much about him? Like—like what's he doing? Or where he's hanging out?"

"Not much," Black replied slowly. "Heard he quit the old life—got a ranch now."

"No!" breathed the boy unbelieving. "Where?"

Black murmured, "El Paso, maybe."

"That *is* a long way off," the boy mused. "Think of him living all them years without getting killed. Golly! He must have been real good, eh mister?"

A little grin involuntarily curled Black's lips. "I reckon so."

They sat in silence quite a while, each deeply sober within his own thoughts. Then Black said, "So your ma don't care so much for your uncle?"

"I reckon not," Jimmy answered uncertainly. "Never says nothing agin him, but she don't never want to talk of him, neither."

"What's your name, son?"

"Jimmy Myers."

Black nodded. By the time he had finished camp chores, an exhausted slumber had enveloped Jimmy Myers.

MORNING'S damp, chill darkness found Black concealed at the rim of a pine wood.

Tilted back on his head was a dusty gray stetson, a trifle small for him to wear any other way. It was his nephew's hat. His own he had left at the camp. Nor was it his own horse saddled and standing patiently a few feet to his rear.

In the gathering dawn light, Black watched the boy scuttle quickly about the little clearing—rolling his blankets, saddling up Black's horse. The boy's head swung around apprehensively every so often, and Black knew the eyes were searching the trees and brush with puzzlement and fear. It was obvious Jimmy was anxious to be trailing out. He was not even pausing to fix himself grub.

Black watched as his nephew rode down through the brush and got out of sight in the timber. He waited in the trees, letting time drift. Then he mounted and rode back down to the camp.

Black knew that two trails could not track out from the clearing. The posse would split and take to both trails. And Jimmy probably left sign that a preacher could read.

Black sauntered over to a windfall tree and found a comfortable place to squat.

Two hours later he heard the breaking of brush, a remote sound far below. A hard, set grin came to his lips. A half hour after that a rough voice shouted a warning from the trees. "You're covered, mister! Walk soft!"

Black took the pipe slowly from between his teeth and angled his head. "I'm unarmed," he yelled. "Gun's in my saddle-roll. And I'm plumb tuckered out waiting for you law-johnnies to ride in. So let's get trailing back, pronto." ● ● ●

a true story

Fantastic Floater

By MURRAY T. PRINGLE

MANY strange specimens of humanity have traveled down the Mississippi River since DeSoto first gazed upon the Father of Waters. Voyagers who ran the gamut from adventurers to zanies. Perhaps none were stranger, though, or chose an odder method of transportation than did Captain Paul Boyton who acquired considerable fame of a sort in the early days of river travel.

Captain Boyton was somewhere in between the two extremes of peculiar travelers, though to be entirely truthful, it was generally conceded that he leaned a little more to crackpot than to adventurer.

By the time he was thirty-three, Paul Boyton had really been around. At various times he had been a seaman, a prospector, a Mexican revolutionist, a soldier in the Franco-Prussian War, a diamond hunter, and the first life-guard captain at Atlantic City. In that last capacity he saved seventy-one lives.

It was while working at this job of fishing waterlogged ladies and lugs out of the drink that Boyton was approached by a man named C. S. Merriem, a Pittsburgh rubber manufacturer. Merriem had an

idea—and a product—to sell. It was called the Merriem rubber suit, and was a curious and cumbersome waterproof affair that weighed thirty-five pounds and covered the entire body except for the face. It contained five internal compartments which could be inflated.

"This product was made to order for a man like yourself," Merriem declared to the life-saver. "Put it on, try it, and see."

Boyton, skeptical at first, finally decided to accept the invitation. And though it made him look like some sort of obese sea monster, the suit lived up to every claim the rubber manufacturer had made for it. Wearing it, Boyton could stand upright in the water or float on his back, as leak-proof as a whale. Convinced, after a few trials, that the suit actually did possess great life-saving and money-making potentialities, Boyton bought Merriem's great idea—and his rubber suit—on the spot.

He demonstrated it in a maiden voyage by going overboard from a liner off the coast of Ireland. He plunged into the sea, bobbed about violently like a huge, storm-tossed cork for a few minutes, then began paddling. Seven hours later he dragged himself up on the shore of the Emerald Isle, safe, and dry inside his suit.

With its worth proved beyond all doubt, Boyton toured the whole of Europe, demonstrating it, and making headlines and money everywhere he went.

After performing before huge crowds all over Europe, Boyton began to look about for wider fields. Assured that he would find them not only wider, but greener in America, he returned to his native land. His first action on his arrival was to announce that he would take his rubber suit on a voyage beginning at Glendive, Montana, and on down the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers to St. Louis, a distance of three thousand, eight hundred and fifty miles!

The first reaction to his boast was not promising. Entirely too many people laughed, and promptly labeled Captain Boyton "a crackpot of the first water." They forgot all about him—until he made the whole country sit up and take notice.

He arrived at Glendive, his starting point, on schedule, and began readying his equipment for the unique voyage. His gear included a trumpet which he hung about his neck, signal lights, rockets, compass, maps, alarm clock, pistol and shotgun. All were stowed in a little tin-and-canvas boat he christened the *Baby Mine* and which he towed behind him by a rope fastened about his waist.

On the day of his take-off, interest in his daring was beginning to take hold, and Boyton was given a salute by General Wesley Merritt, Army commander at Glendive. The general's pretty daughter presented the adventurer with a set of colors. He had not neglected to work up proper publicity, so cannons boomed and scores of watchers on the river banks cheered Blubber-Boy on his way. Boyton unlimbered his double paddle, waved it triumphantly, and began paddling a hundred strokes to the minute.

He had gone no more than a couple of miles after getting started, though, than he realized that in selecting his itinerary he had bitten off a considerable hunk of trouble. There were a score of things to worry him—rapids, eddies, quicksand, hot sun and insects, buffalo herds, freezing nights, storms and snags and hostile Indians.

But of them all, Boyton's greatest fears were for the redskins and the snags. An Indian arrow or bullet, or an unseen snag under the surface of the river might rip his suit and cause him no end of grief. Expert swimmer though he was, it would be no easy thing to swim a treacherous river with thirty-five pounds of limp, deflated rubber clinging to him.

There was nothing to do, however, but go on. Boyton did—mile after mile in the muddy stream; hour after hour. At night he would beach on a sandbank, remove and dry his suit, build a fire, eat dinner and enjoy a pipe or two before turning in for a few hours' sleep. His alarm clock would rouse him an hour before dawn. By the time the eastern sky was just be-

ginning to light up he would be back on the river in his rubber suit, bobbing along.

It can hardly be said, though, that he made his unusual trip without incident. Once he had to cling to a submerged tree for hours while thousands of buffalo filled the river below him, with him hoping and praying that none of them would catch sight of him and be curious enough to investigate. At the junction of the Yellowstone and the Missouri, when an Indian fired at him, the shot blasted the water scant inches from his feet. Boyton retaliated by blowing a sharp blast on his bugle, which came so near to scaring the breechclout off the redskin that it frightened him back into the woods.

After reaching the Missouri, Captain Boyton found the scenery wilder and the stream swifter. Soon he was being buffeted about among the high buttes like a ping-pong ball. A trapper in a covered boat spotted the blubbery figure, decided it was some new sort of critter and let go a shot at it. Fortunately he missed, and when he realized what the thing really was, he invited the "critter" aboard for a dinner of beaver tail.

One evening Boyton beached himself and wandered off to a campfire where he found a dozen white men. The astonished men, who were camped with a herd of cattle, asked him to supper, and gave him some provisions. It was not until a week later that Boyton learned that the gentlemen who had shared their food with him had been rustlers. They had been caught and hanged the day after he had met them!

Twice during the long trip Boyton had to stop and repair his leaking suit. And there were other catastrophes. His signal pistol blew up; half his paddle was burned; he got stuck in a quagmire; and was shot at by an Indian again. By the time he reached Bismarck, the pneumatic navigator was thinking seriously of chucking the whole thing.

Fortunately, he received an unexpected shot in the arm when he reached Bismarck. Waiting for him was a New York *Herald* reporter named James Creelman who had been assigned to accompany him the rest of the way in a canvas boat.

Creelman's coverage of Boyton's trip, however, was his secondary reason for showing up. His main assignment was to gather and write stories about Indians. Through Creelman, Boyton met such famous chiefs as Rain-in-the-Face, Low Dog, Gaul, and Long Soldier. At Fort Randall they met Chief Sitting Bull.

Chief Sitting Bull was highly intrigued by the vulcanized voyager. After examining him with a fine-tooth comb, the warrior decided he had the answer. Calling his braves around, Sitting Bull proceeded to deliver a learned address on just why Boyton was able to float.

Nothing to it, said Sitting Bull. This man, Boyton, he empty inside, hollow as rotten log. So he float on surface!

By the last week in October, Boyton and Creelman had left the Dakotas, and had begun to hit more civilized spots, like Sioux City and Omaha. In Omaha, the town went wild over them. Thousands lined the river banks, cheering wildly. One gent, either madly excited or loaded with liquor, allowed that he, too, was unsinkable. He proceeded to prove his claim by plunging into the river. He was drowned.

Boyton and Creelman were driven in style to Omaha's biggest and finest hotel. But they didn't stay long. Winter was fast approaching and Boyton was anxious to complete his trip before winter made it impossible for him to go further.

Running a race with winter now, Boyton paddled day and night, sometimes through snowstorms and freezing rain. Sixty-four days after leaving Glendive, Montana, the rubber riverman and his journalist companion reached St. Louis—end of the trail!

The St. Louies pulled him out of the water and proceeded to go crazy in their wild enthusiasm for the rubber-wrapped conqueror of the wilderness. Nothing was too good for him. He was the latest hero of the West. And, everybody assured him, with much back-slapping, he was one of the greatest. ● ● ●

SIXGUN

The homesteader proved it took more than a sixgun to make a man, particularly when he had a wife who puzzled him . . .

The brand landed on the back of the bandido's head

HOMESTEAD

A Novelet by DICK EDSTROM

CHAPTER I

Dying Stranger

THE RED orb of the sun was almost a finger-width above the eastern prairie horizon. Will Merritt's Conestoga cast its long shadow, like an arrow, toward the heart of the Colorado country. Will himself, tall and contemplative with a little of the heaviness of the oxen he tended, rejoiced in the vision of the morning shadow.

It pointed his way through a land where a man at full height was often the tallest living thing. No coal-smoldering pungency clotted the nostrils as in his Pennsylvania city home. No stiff-fronted red buildings blocked the way. He moved toward a new life—from an old one.

And from something else too.

But that something else, a haunting memory, was his own secret. A secret he shared not even with his bride.

He turned his head to look at her. The morning sun sent golden splinters past his eyes and he squinted. Jessica drowsed in the wagon's drive seat. The day's furnace-hot sun had not yet spilled the edge of the Conestoga's cloth cone and found her, so she wore no bonnet.

Jessica had a softly-rounded body and her brown locks spilled free about her shoulders. Her face, heavy-lidded in repose, brought a vague clutching to Will's chest.

It would to any man's, he knew.

The oxen lumbered forward, one of

them blowing idly. Will felt the early morning warmth across his back with pleasure. The wheels turned, complaining softly.

"A man is coming, on horseback," Jessica said, some wonderment in her voice. She had just awakened and was rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

Will walked beside the oxen, one hand on a beast's stiff-haired head. He strained up, to see more horizon. At first the rider was a black dot where a fuzzy grayness stretched along the prairie brown-green. The dot grew slowly. Merritt's rig plodded ahead. Both Will and Jessica watched with interest as they had spoken to no one for five days.

At last they could see the pony. He was a foam-covered black, and the rider seemed low on him. Then they saw a dangling arm which brought a look of apprehension between them. One of the oxen shook its head and made grumbling sounds. The pony was close now and they saw that it loped loosely and uncontrolled. Will stopped the oxen and stood waiting. The black's eyes bulged as it reached them.

It swerved abruptly, fore muscles braced, and threw the rider off to one side. He hit, hard. The fall wrenched a sobbed groan from him but no more.

Will was out to the rider fast with Jessica not far behind him. Together they rolled the man over. The face they saw was thin and pitted. Lank brown hair streamed over the forehead and pale blue eyes looked unblinkingly up to them. As they watched, the eyelids dropped shut. The rider's shirt hung about him in loose ragged folds. It was caked with blood, some of it crusted and brown. Will noted that the man's right hand was bloodied up where he had clawed at his wound.

"Look at the grayness on him," Will said, "this man is hard hit. Get some water."

"I'll tear up a petticoat—" Jessica added.

"Yes. And bring your thinnest short-bladed kitchen knife."

Jessica ran to the wagon in the awkward way that women run. Overhead two scavenger birds wheeled in slow circles.

THAT NIGHT they camped where the lone rider had come to them. He lay covered by a blanket near the fire. The flickering yellow of the flames etched the lines of his face in shadow. Merritt recognized the waxen color of the hurt man and reckoned he would breathe his last before morning.

His thoughts were interrupted by Jessica's approach. She had finished cleaning and putting away their tin dishes. Now she seated herself beside Will. His mind left the wounded stranger and he started to speak of what lay ahead of them, and of his plans for a homestead. The words came to him with hesitation at first, but as his vision took hold of him his voice cleared and the words rang out strong and positive.

He spoke of the magnitude of the Western country, of his love for it, of the home he hoped to hew from the tall timber stand beside some good watersite, and of the character of the children they would some day have, born free and with plenty of space in which to grow. The fire spit and crackled, dying low. When Merritt had finished he saw that Jessica was smiling. Her smile was warm and alive. But there was no love in it—and little modesty.

"You really believe in the West, don't you Will?" she said. Her eyes almost seemed to examine him with a faint curiosity.

"You know that I do," he said. "And you must believe in it too. It would be a bad thing if only one believed." Will's voice betrayed faint surprise. Jessica was showing a side he had never known before.

"I'm going to turn in, Will," said Jessica, avoiding his question, as she rose and moved toward the wagon's front. "If you need help with him," she nodded toward the stranger's shrouded figure, "call me."

Merritt sat alone, cross-legged, before the glowing remnants of the fire. The coolness of the Kansas night was slowly enveloping him. His thoughts turned toward

his bride. Was Jessica a homesteading woman? He didn't really know.

He had returned to his home weak and sick in spirit after the four long years against the Johnny Rebs. Jessica had been new in the neighborhood. The war had hurt her too. She had grown up with too few beaux, too few good times. They had been drawn to each other and he had married her quickly, before either of them had time to think. Now in the long heated prairie days the newness was wearing off. Merritt could feel that Jessica was recognizing his essential slowness, his lack of wit. He was saddened at the thought. Where would her new understanding of him lead?

The wounded man groaned softly. Merritt was attentive, waiting for the man to speak. But the only sound was labored breathing as a life was working out its last agonized moments. Will had lived that scene many times during the war.

The stranger, Will had discovered, had been shot in the back—shot so that the slug had pierced him just above the gun-rig and torn out of his upper chest. The wounded man had been riding away, low on his horse. Riding away—from what?

CHAPTER II

Savage Death

GLOWING faggots popped softly as the fire in them died. Will rested his head in his hands. The day had tired him and his unsolved problems were dispiriting. Gradually the little pops of the charred faggots came to Will as distant rifle fire. Merritt imagined himself once again with his faded blue regiment in line of battle near Appomatox.

A company was being thrown forward as skirmishers, himself, tired and war-sick, among them. The rolling countryside wore a new April green. The skirmish line advanced into a thick wood. Will found himself alone and pushed into a small clearing. Shock gripped him for there, not fifteen feet away stood an armed Rebel. The Rebel was ragged but young and cleared-eyed, his youth standing out like a new suit of clothes.

Will desperately did not want to pull the trigger. There had already been too many pulled triggers. But he did. The Rebel's strong face showed through the smoke as it went over backwards, gouged out and bloody, with an eye shot away.

Will shook his head numbly and the gory vision left him but he knew it would return. It would always haunt him as a needless ending of a young life. For Merritt had later learned that he had pulled trigger *after* the agreed armistice between Grant and Lee and the young Rebel had not tried to finish Will though he'd had the time.

This was Will Merritt's haunting secret. Because of it Merritt carried no shooting weapon in his rig. He would never carry a gun again. The Ghost Rebel marched beside him to make sure of that.

Will's head collapsed into his folded arms. A strand of dark hair dangled before his half shut eyes. Gradually Merritt began to doze as the silence of the prairie night descended on the campsite.

Wakefulness came to him suddenly. He raised his head, alert. Just the whisper of a shoe-scuff marred the night quiet. The sound was directly behind Will. Fear gripped his heavy frame, and for a moment he fought back a feeling of panic. Then he leaped across the fire, in one movement, swiveled and kicked a glow of light from the low-burning embers.

Perhaps twenty feet from Will stood a man. He was tall and sinewy with small, mean features set in a small half-bald head. Huge hands hung at his sides.

"Excuse me, Pard," the man said. His voice had the ring of a sledge strike on granite. "Excuse me. I didn't mean to alarm you none. Lost my pack horse to Injuns a day west of here and ain't had much in the way of vittles since then. Could you see me to a feed, Pard?"

"Come ahead," Will said, a wariness in his voice. The homesteader kicked wood

onto the fire as the long man shuffled into the campsite. Though Merritt was tall, the man could give him half a head. Will noted the heavy coat of dust on the man's clothes and the weariness in his eyes. A sixgun was slung on one flank.

As the man seated himself by the fire Merritt climbed into the Conestoga. Jessica was inside the wagon's crowded bulk, already bedded for the night. Her hair showed darkly against the white bed clothes. As Merritt approached, her warm fingers caught his wrist.

"Will, what is it?" she said.

Jessica's firm grip betrayed the fear her voice didn't show.

"I don't know," Merritt said. "Perhaps it's nothing. Just another stranger. Whatever happens you are to stay quiet in here. Do you understand?"

"Be careful, Will," Jessica pleaded.

Merritt groped among their cooking supplies. He left the Conestoga carrying salt pork and coffee and a plentiful supply of the biscuits Jessica had made that evening.

Will found the long man apparently gazing into the fire which threw his quivering shadow, even longer, against the Conestoga's cloth top.

"A well disposed man is always welcome to a feed," Will said.

As the homesteader fried the spitting pork and set the coffee to boiling the long man sat with head bowed, his eyes concealed behind half closed lids. He seemed alert enough, however, when the meal was ready and set his teeth into the meat and biscuit with vigor. The man's single utensil was a chipped sheath knife. The instrument moved with swift precision, toylike, in the grasp of the enormous fingers.

Finally the long man set down his tin plate. As he belched contentedly his small red-rimmed eyes turned to Will.

"I see you got a casualty in your outfit, Pard," he said.

MERRITT had all but forgotten the wounded stranger bedded on the other side of the fire. He began the story of the stranger's arrival. The long man's assured gaze never left Will's face. The great hands were crumpled, helpless looking, above the tin plate. His tongue worked among his teeth as the homesteader finished his tale.

"Do you know of this man?" Will asked.

"Maybe I do and maybe I don't," the long man said. "I'd be obliged to see his horse."

"That's fair enough," Will said. "He's hobbled nearby."

Merrit brought the black around. The sweat had dried on its flanks. The saddle, brown-crusted with dry blood, remained on the horse. Saddlebags bulged behind it.

"I was going to rub him down before I turned in tonight," Will said. "We were busy this afternoon taking care of— Say there!"

The long man uncoiled himself at the fire and leaped to the rounded saddlebags. His eyes shined. The huge hands fumbled at the bag straps, then plunged deep inside. They reappeared, cupped, brimming with orbs of shining metal. The long man held two hands full of twenty-dollar gold pieces!

"See it, Pard. Look at it," the man hissed.

Merritt's jaw gaped. His eyes ballooned. He had never seen so much gold.

"Now," the long man growled. "I'm taking this horse and the gold and weeding out of here. I'll be refixing this animal for pack work. Bring me pork and hardtack, enough for a week, and some sweets if you got any."

Yellow firelight etched Merritt's square jaw.

"I'll give you nothing," he said. "That's stolen gold, I'll wager."

"Don't make me kill you, Pard," the long man said in a metallic voice.

Their tensed shadows were gigantic against the wagon's cloth top. The long man's hand enveloped the handle of his sixgun. Slowly he raised the weapon until the barrel mouth focused on Merritt's middle.

"All right, hop to it," the long man gritted. "Pack that horse."

Will felt his determination to resist leave him like flowing sand. After all the man was armed and very self-confident. The homesteader found himself moving to pack the horse as he had been ordered.

The long man holstered his gun and leaned casually against the black horse's rump, one gangling arm thrown over the gold-filled saddlebags. Will, aggravated but fearful, observed out of the corners of his eyes as he lifted a coil of rope from a wooden peg in the Conestoga's side.

The long man sauntered around the fire to the shrouded form of the wounded rider. A grimace of contempt contorted his small mouth. He tipped a boot-toe under the rider's blanket and kicked it off to one side. The hurt man's bandaged chest was a shocking white against his swarthy skin.

As Merritt watched, horrified, the long man's hands once more dropped languidly to his sixgun butt. Forgetful of himself Will hurried to the side of the wounded rider.

The long man ignored the distraught homesteader. He addressed himself to the cadaverous figure below him who was conscious. There was terror in the fluttering eyelids and in the weak spasmodic working of his jaw.

The long man held his sixgun loosely. In his great paw it looked like a toy.

"You should have knowed better than that, Cassidy," he said in a low-pitched voice, "trying to run out on the rest of us with the gold. If I hadn't caught up to you Munson would have. It appears you're near done anyway. It's best that I finish the job though. Got your prayers said?"

The long man's bunched fingers adjusted themselves on his six-gun handle. He squinted down the barrel. A low, racking moan escaped from the lips of the helpless rider. His eyes bulged fear.

Merritt's shock and apprehension gave way to a flash of uncontrollable anger. He leaped at the long man, one hand deflecting the leveled sixgun, the other searching out the killer's throat. The long man, taken by surprise, was rocked several steps backward on his heels. Will's fist closed in an iron grasp over the sixgun cylinder.

The outlaw regained his footing and muttered a curse. His free paw found Will's shirtfront and twisted it into a

THE PROMONTORY BENDER

ONE of the most flagrant falsifications of American history centers about the completion of the transcontinental railroad at Promontory, Utah, May 10, 1869, and the ceremonies that marked this event. In a famous wet-plate photograph of the meeting of locomotives *Jupiter* and *119*, two men are shown, leaning out from the fronts of the engines and passing a flag between them. This pious business is a fraud. On the original plate the object being passed is a whiskey bottle.

History texts report the momentous incident in reverent tones, yet all accounts agree that most of those present at Promontory were hilariously gay. An august representative of the Union Pacific was himself under the influence of various beverages to the point where he could not drive the golden spike. Luckily someone sober enough to do the job was found and the ceremonies were completed. History, after all, was made by human beings rather than stuffed shirts!

—Robert Stephens

choking band around the homesteader's chest. Will found himself bodily lifted off his feet and dashed earthward. An upthrust knee met Merritt's jaw in midfall. The impact sent a rending jolt of pain through the homesteader's head. Somehow he maintained his grip on the sixgun. The long man, now in a frenzy, spewed curses.

Primed for a final effort, the homesteaded fastened both hands to the sixgun and violently twisted upward. The prairie night was shattered by a thunder clap of sound. The long man crumpled loosely to the ground. The .44 slug had caught him under the jaw. He was dead.

CHAPTER III

Suspicious Lawman

WILL, still on his knees, stared at the sprawled body of the long man, his dulled mind at first refusing to accept what had occurred. Blood and bits of shattered tooth filled the homesteader's mouth. He fell forward on his hands, head hanging, and spit into the sod. The cooled earth was soothing to his palms.

"I've killed another human being," Will thought. But, this time, no painful throbs of self condemnation came to him. And he was too exhausted just then for any other emotion. He pushed himself weakly to his feet.

"Will," a voice said urgently. It was Jessica speaking.

The girl stood beside the hurt rider's black, a shawl thrown over her night clothes. A saddlebag gaped open and cupped against Jessica's body was a shimmering pile of yellow metal.

Excitedly she crossed the camp's perimeter to Merritt's side.

"Will, look, there's thousands of dollars in gold here. We're rich, Will. We're rich!"

Jessica seemed to vibrate with an animal exhilaration. The thought of keeping the stolen gold never entered Merritt's mind. He shook his head groggily trying to clear the fog in his mind.

"They're all twenty dollar gold pieces, Will, stacks of them," Jessica went on. "There must be twenty thousand dollars here. *Twenty thousand dollars,* Will! We can go to San Francisco, buy a big house like Judge Ronald's in Pennsylvania. We don't have to homestead. We can—"

"Jessica, woman, don't talk like this. You don't mean it."

"Oh Will, we don't have to sit in this miserable sun-bleached country and dry up any more. We can go—anywhere!"

"Don't you know I just killed a man and another lies here dying, for all I know may be dead now?"

"And what should they mean to us," Jessica said desperately. "They're homeless. They're filthy. They smell bad. They would have killed us both without hesitation. But it worked the other way and we're rich now. Can't you see that, Will?"

"That money belongs somewhere."

"Will, don't you see," Jessica said imploringly, "don't you see it? We're two tiny specks in this limitless, God-forsaken wasteland. We're unknown. As far as other men are concerned we never existed here. No one ever need know. California is full of runaways. There would be no questions asked. Will, I was made for nice things."

He knew it was true, and it bit into him.

"Look at these two hands, Will," Jessica went on. "Here, feel the skin of my face. What do you want? To see these hands red and cracked, my face roughened and sun-dried? I've seen these plains women. I know how they get. I can feel their hoplessness. It's closing in on me now. Oh Will, you wouldn't keep me in this life, not after what's happened?"

Merritt could say nothing. His voice was choked. Jessica knelt beside him and pressed the warmth of her body against his. She found his lips and he felt the light caress of her fingers in his hair.

THE wounded man died that night, as Merritt had figured he would, without uttering a word. Before the thin rays of dawn Will had heaved the two bodies over the stranger's black and buried them five hundred yards off the trail. Afterwards he smoothed up the grave sites and shooed off both the outlaws' horses. Then he buried their saddles and gear in one spot and the sixgun in another. He never saw, nor spoke about the gold to Jessica.

For two days the grunting oxen rolled the Conestoga westward from the fateful campsite. Will paced beside them, his broad features a browning mask. The fact that Jessica had kept the gold was a constant aggravation to him, and the Ghost Rebel haunted him nightly reproving him for the long man's death. Jessica spoke seldom. Her few words were light and careless, in the manner of women when they wish to avoid a subject.

On the third morning a rider approached on the eastern trail. He was almost up to them when Will spotted him. The homesteader stopped the oxen and waited, eyes tightened against the morning sun. A gentle wind ruffled the prairie grass. The rider came on at an easy gallop. He sat his horse well. Jessica, in the wagon seat, stretched for a look. Alarmed, she shot an apprehensive glance toward Will, then quickly composed her features.

The rider reined his horse close to the Conestoga. He was a straight-backed man who had a certain neatness in his demeanor. He handled his horse with a hint of dash that Will envied. The rider lifted his hat.

"Beg your pardon, folks," he said. "My name is Milt Brent, sheriff out of Cimarron, two days ride southeast of here."

Merritt identified himself and Jessica in thickened tones. A hopelessness assailed him. He could feel his guilt stand out like a new red shirt.

The lawman's eyes bored into Will.

"Ever hear of Jack Cassidy or Pete Benteen?" he said. "Benteen was mostly called 'Snake' but sometimes Pete."

"No," Merritt answered. His tongue felt clumsy and large enough to choke him.

"I've been reading your sign," the lawman said. "It tells me you buried those men about two days back."

Will flushed. His mind scrambled for an answer.

"Yes, we buried two men," a casual voice said. Jessica was speaking. The smile she gave Brent seemed one of open-faced innocence. Or was it? Merritt thought he sensed something else in that smile, the ghost of an invitation, perhaps, but he couldn't be sure.

"Yes, we buried two men, Mr. Brent," Jessica said, still smiling prettily. "We found them dead with the scavenger birds after them. I told Will the least we could do for the poor fellows would be to give them a Christian burial. We never did know their names though."

"I see, ma'am," Brent said courteously. "You found no equipment or—ah—personal effects near the bodies?"

"No, just the poor men themselves."

The lawman reflected for a moment.

"You folks deserve to know a few things. Those men you found shot up were part of a five-man bank robbery outfit," he said.

Jessica feigned wide-eyed surprise.

"Both of them were Missouri quick-draws that pulled out for Texas just ahead of the law," Brent went on. "Down there they linked up with Frank Munson who is wanted all over the West for the murder of a U.S. marshal at Fort Laramie three years back. About a week ago they hit a bank at Independence, shot down a slow-moving teller, and got away with twenty-two thousand in gold. News was they headed for Texas, but maybe not. According to rumors the five of them fell to arguing on the trail. One ran out with the gold but they winged him. If those rumors were correct that would be Jack Cassidy who had the gold, and you folks buried him. I'm sorry, but I'll be obliged to search your rig."

"Why of course you may," Jessica said. "We'll do anything we can to help." Jessica was seemingly impressed by the law-

man's efficiciency.

Brent stretched from his horse and climbed, neat and wiry, to the wagon's drive seat. Jessica tucked up her skirts and drew herself out of his way. She favored the sheriff with her lively smile as she did so. Will thought he saw a tinge of color shade the lawman's face before he disappeared into the Conestoga's interior. But the exertion of climbing into a wagon could bring color to a man, Merritt told himself, although the sheriff was a little young for that.

THE sickening feeling that Brent would soon present them with tangible proof of their deceit soon drove any thought of Jessica from the homesteader's mind. He stood beside the restless oxen, feeling the breeze on his bared lower arms, waiting for the sheriff to find the gold. But he never did.

Brent finally emerged from the wagon and remounted his horse. The hard line of his mouth bespoke his inner perplexities.

"Well, I expect you folks are cleared," the lawman said, his voice low pitched, serious. "But you should be warned. Frank Munson is a dangerous man and he reads sign good. If you don't have that specie now he'll be after you folks looking for it—wanting his gold. He's killed for it once. He'll do it again. I wouldn't take a chance on him. Your smart move would be to come on back to Cimarron with me for a week or so. A U.S. marshal's posse has been pushing Munson hard. They might finish him any time.

Jessica smiled her very best smile.

"I'm sure Mr. Munson wouldn't harm innocent people," she said. "Besides, my husband wants to homestead before the snows."

"Suit yourself, ma'am," Brent said gravely, "but you folks have no guns in your rig. I could lend you a cavalry Spencer, a breech loader—"

"No guns," Will growled. His eyes fell to the sun-cracked oxen yoke. "We'll carry no guns."

This was one vow the homesteader determined he would not break. It was a vow he couldn't break if he wanted to.

Brent's brows knit momentarily in puzzlement.

"Suit yourselves. Good luck to you," he said. As the sheriff touched a forefinger to his hat brim, his hard eyes lingered on the blue-black knee bruise still thinly visible on Merritt's jaw. Then he moved on to the eastern trail.

Will rubbed a calloused finger over the bruise's purple soreness. Had Brent guessed at his night battle with the long man? What of the gold? There were so many questions and so few answers. Merritt shook his heavy head like a perplexed bull.

A muffled sob snapped the homesteader to alertness. Jessica's body was bent low on the wagon seat. Her hair streamed down unattended. She was crying violently into her open palms. Finally, she looked up, her eyes glazed with tears.

"The gold—" Jessica said brokenly. "He didn't find the gold. That night you killed the bandit I hid it in the water barrel."

Somehow there had been a change in Jessica's voice. To Will, standing bareheaded beside the oxen, it rasped like an ungreased wagon axle.

CHAPTER IV

Den of Thieves

BEFORE sundown the plains country broke into gentle-flowing hills. That night they camped near water. A broken creek bed cut the prairie sod and meandered erratically to the northeast. Merritt took the oxen to water and stood by them, somewhat comforted by the soft blowing sounds of the drinking beasts. His forehead was ridged and his eyes clouded in thoughtfulness. Will calculated that the lawman still suspected them, that he would no doubt back trail scanning the ground for cached gold. Then he'd turn

off to Cimarron and pick up a posse, maybe a U.S. marshal too. If the sheriff was so inclined he could fetch them again in a week's time. Would he be so inclined? Or would they meet Frank Munson first?

To the homesteader their chances of escaping with the gold were dim. Their travel was slow and cumbersome. They were unarmed. To continue would mean the end of any future happiness, no matter what happened. He resolved to turn around, to start that night for Cimarron.

Leaving the oxen grunting contentedly, Will ascended to the campsite. Jessica had pulled some faggots out of the wagon and was urging a glowing spark of fire into flame.

He stopped beside her, looking down.

"You know our chances, don't you?" Will said.

She didn't return his glance.

"Yes," she said.

"Jessica, forget the money." The words tumbled over each other. "Our world was untroubled, now it's all trouble. Life is full of trouble and money buys most of it for a man. Awake or sleeping we'll never be free of fear. It's not worth it, Jessica. Fear will corrode us. It'll eat out our hearts. It's not too late to turn back now. This time tomorrow it may be. Let's pack up right away. We can catch Brent before dawn."

The fire crackled into flame. Jessica moved to the Conestoga. She turned abruptly, her face determined.

"No Will, not now. I'm sorry but we mustn't give up. It would kill me."

"But have you considered?"

"It wouldn't matter. My mind is made up."

A feeling of hopelessness swept Merritt. His eyes were still on Jessica, dull, unseeing. As he watched, the girl's lips formed a soundless "O." The determination on her features was replaced by surprise, then horror.

"Behind you Will!" she shrieked.

A muted thud shot stabs of crackling pain through Merritt's head. He felt himself slipping into a void of blackness, his muscled limbs folding loosely. Somewhere, far away, Jessica was screaming. The homesteader's jaw met the earth with jarring abruptness. Blackness closed in. . . .

Will regained consciousness slowly. He first heard a voice, seemingly thin and far away.

"Over there," the voice said, "lay him over there. Rest his head against the wagon wheel."

Strong hands dragged Merritt to his feet. His head felt wobbly on the weak stem of his neck. A powerful odor, mixed of stale sweat, leather and tobacco, assailed the homesteader's nostrils. The strong hands dropped him brutally and his skull cracked against the hardness of a wheel spoke.

Will opened his eyes slightly only to shut them quickly as a stab of firelight set his head throbbing. Black shadows moved before him and he could hear the scratch of moving dirt-crusted clothes. Voices rumbled. Will started to abandon himself to the more comfortable world of blackness when a cascade of chilled water violently struck his face. The homesteader gasped and sputtered and clarity of thought quickly returned to him. Again he opened his eyes.

DIRECTLY over Merritt stood a squat, bow-legged Mexican. His undershot lower jaw was covered by bristly beard stubble and in his hands was a dripping, but empty, wooden bucket. Behind the Mexican stood a taller man whose short-coat almost hid the sixgun he wore. He had the appearance of great muscular strength and was bluntly handsome in spite of angry red scars that furrowed half his forehead. On the opposite side of the campsite, a third man, stooped and weak-featured, stood watch on a cringing Jessica. The three men were dusty and travel-stained.

"Lupe," the heavy man said in a strong voice, "if you've killed him I'll take it out of your hide."

The Mexican smiled ingratiatingly, revealing the long, yellowed teeth of his lower jaw.

"Ah, no, no, Amigo," he said. "See, his eyes open."

The heavy man searched Merritt's features piercingly. He pushed the Mexican to one side with a sweep of one thick arm and squatted before the weakened homesteader, the lines of his face tensed.

"Do you know who I am?" he gritted. "My name is Frank Munson. I'm known as a killer mostly because I am one. I can see farther than a bald eagle and I can hear like a frightened doe, but mostly I smelled you out. I know you have twenty-two thousand dollars in gold that belongs to me. What's more, I have the disposition of a three-legged minx and I dislike being roused up. Don't try me unless you want to get hurt. Now, where is that gold?"

Will felt waves of fear pulse through his body. Cold sweat drenched his shirt. His throat was choked and lumpy. But somewhere down inside the homesteader a stubborn determination still lived. He said nothing.

"It's plain enough then," Munson finally said. "You want to be pried open the hard way."

The gunman swung a thick hand behind him into which Lupe dropped a primitive knife.

"Bring the girl close up here, Jake," Munson ordered. "She won't want to miss this."

A moment later Jessica's pale face appeared above Will. Behind her stood the stooped outlaw. The terrorized homesteader searched desperately for a gentle glance, for some sign of encouragement from his bride. There was none. Jessica avoided Will's eyes.

Merritt flinched. An agony of spirit descended on him. To all appearances his wife of short duration was willing to see him die under a slow knife rather than reveal her hidden gold.

Munson ripped open the homesteader's shirt to the belt line in a single swift motion. The knife glittered, a soft yellow in the trembling light of the fire. Will could feel the prick of its point on his upper chest. The gunman's merciless face glared. Will felt the blade's pressure grow, slowly, surely. With a thrust of sharp pain the homesteader's skin parted and the blade tip slid between his ribs. A trickle of blood etched its narrow path from the wound to the earth. Merritt stiffled a groan by grinding his teeth. A sudden force on the knife would finish him fast and he wished for it.

A choked cry split the charged atmosphere. All eyes turned to Jessica. She stood hunched over, her face buried in her hands.

"Stop," the girl said, her voice trembling. "No more, please. The gold is in the water barrel."

THE outlaws smiled in triumph. For a moment the homesteader and his wife were ignored as the three rushed for the water barrel. With a rending crash the container was wrenched to the sod where spreading water advanced a black stain. The outlaws, panting hoarsely, quickly kicked the barrel to pieces with heavy-booted feet. There, shimmering wetly, lay a multitude of gold coins. Shouts of exultation escaped the lips of the three gunmen.

"Look here," Munson said, "you two load up my saddlebags with this pronto."

Lupe glanced sharply upward.

"*Madre de Dios*, Amigo. Why do we not divide it now? After all this trouble—"

"We divide in Texas and not before," he said. "Remember I still ride herd on this outfit."

The *bandido* and the stooped yellow man bent sullenly to collect the yellow metal.

Munson turned his back on the two, apparently no longer concerned with them. To Will's surprise he was smiling, a smile that was markedly appealing.

"You'll have to pardon all this ruckus," the outlaw said to Jessica. "Times come up when a man has to get mean or people will stomp on him. Now we'd be greatly obliged for a little bacon and whatever you got. We haven't been eating too regular these past few days."

"Of course," Jessica said, and to Will, enfeebled, Jessica's voice was a little too obliging.

The girl immediately busied herself with getting a meal. Lupe and Jake scratched up the gold, walked Munson's horse into the campsite and set about loading the saddlebags. Will lay still, his dark hair plastered wetly about his forehead, the blood congealing on his bare chest. Strength was returning to him faster than he had dared hope and Jessica had not betrayed him. The homesteader watched—and waited for his chance.

Munson sat cross-legged by the fire, so placed that both Will and the disgruntled outlaws were well within his range of vision. The girls' rounded arms and graceful womanly movements had aroused a greed in the outlaw leader that renewed the fear in Merritt's breast. Jessica would be noticed anywhere, but in the blazing vastness of the woman-starved West she was a miracle. Munson would be working up a plan. The homesteader waited for it to unfold.

The fire rose to new heights at Jessica's poking. Munson drew back a short distance to escape its singeing heat. He swung his glance to the weak-faced gunman.

"Jake," Munson said, "it appears to me we're going to be here longer than expected. You'd better back trail a couple miles and stand picket. Keep yourself hid if you can, and don't go to sleep."

Jake pulled his mouth down at the corners.

"I need sleep, Frank," he whined. "Besides, we ain't got no time to hang on here. The law—"

"I said stand picket, Jake," Munson snapped. "Lupe will call you when we pull out. Don't lose your head and blow holes in him. Now *vamos!*"

A mournful sigh escaped Jake's lips as he pulled himself stiffly to his feet. A moment later the sound of his horse's hoofs sounded through the night, and faded into distance on the eastern trail.

Meanwhile Merritt's mind was active. Munson's conversation with Jake had told him much. The outlaws were being pushed and pushed hard by a posse. This was the reason for their hunger and their dust-caked saddle weariness. What's more, Munson was taking a risk by delaying to eat. But it wasn't food the gunman was after, Will thought grimly. It was Jessica.

MERRITT'S head throbbed piercingly but his vigor was steadily returning. He prayed that if his chance came he would be strong enough to take advantage of it.

Bacon sizzled and popped over the fire. Jessica bent to attend it. Her hair cascaded in heavy waves about her shoulders and a silver locket danced at her bare neck. Munson's eyes roved over the girl's womanly figure.

"To my way of thinking," Munson said, seemingly speaking to the dull-eyed Lupe seated opposite him, "a beautiful woman deserves beautiful things. If I had me a beautiful woman I'd take her to a big city and dress her in the best finery money can buy. In this country it takes a real man to appreciate a woman, especially a beautiful woman. They're hard to come by, like the gold nuggets those coins were stamped from. I'd say that any man who'd wear out a comely woman homesteading doesn't deserve to have her."

The outlaw leader cocked his head and turned his forceful smile on Jessica.

"In my mind you measure up. You're a beautiful woman and I'm a real man if ever one walked. I'll wager you like nice things too?"

"Any woman likes nice things," Jessica said. She hurried herself with the cooking.

"And a girl never walked that didn't like good times. Lots of good times with money to spend."

"Good times keep a person young."

"And maybe most important a girl needs a real man. I mean one that can give her the things she'll want."

Jessica forked bacon into tin plates.

"Girls are womenfolk," she said. The sound of her voice wrote an invitation.

A slow, glowing anger pushed through Merritt's being. He knew he was slow of thought. He realized there was little dash or glamor about him. But he and Jessica had stood before a preacher and repeated marriage vows. It had meant a great deal to the homesteader and he had done his best for them. Now Jessica was about to desert him when he needed her most. A determination took hold of him. There would be a reckoning before the early spread of dawn-light.

The homesteader lay spread-eagled where the outlaws had dropped him, disheveled, his chest bared and bloody. Only Will's eyes told of his watchfulness. They drank in the scene of the campfire, mobile, alert, behind half-closed lids.

Munson's smile grew.

"It would seem to me," he said to Jessica, "that we talk and think much alike."

"I would say we do," Jessica said, blushing prettily, her eyes on the cooking.

"In that case—" Munson left the sentence unfinished. With remarkable gracefulness he snatched a heavy sputtering brand from the fire and padded toward Lupe. The *bandido,* completely exhausted, sat slouched over, his grotesque jaw slack, fast asleep.

With one great stride Munson was directly behind him. The brand inscribed a circle of sparks in the night prairie sky and landed with a sickening crunch on the back of the *bandido's* head. Lupe went forward, hard, into the campfire. A short cry escaped his lips. There was a hiss of burning hair and the Mexican caught himself rolled to one side and landed on an elbow. He feebly turned himself over and tried to push up to a sitting position, his face showing pain and disbelief.

Without a word Munson struck the *bandido* across both eyes with the now flaming brand, all the power of his shoulders in the blow. Lupe collapsed making small cries, soon was quiet. The air smelled of singed hair.

Jessica stood transfixed, horrified.

The outlaw stood over the dead Mexican, a cruel smile distorting his lips.

"One down," he said, "and one to go." His eyes fell on Will.

CHAPTER V

Homestead Vista

THE SUDDENNESS of Lupe's brutal death had shocked Will into momentary paralysis. Now it was his turn. He felt helpless, completely trapped, a beast at bay. But Munson abruptly ignored him.

The gunman addressed himself to Jessica.

"Lupe didn't know how to spend a payload anyhow. He'd get drunk and spill what he knew and the law would string him up. Now you and me will have to act fast. Get some things together while I finish this homesteader. Remember we'll have to travel light, so don't overdo it. You'll ride Lupe's horse. Hurry it up. There's a posse close on my tail."

Jessica's mouth formed words but she said nothing. Her hands hung limply at her sides. She made no move to obey the outlaw's instructions.

But Merritt had reached the end of his string. The gunman considered him a living dead man, a problem of small importance, to be disposed of at his ease. He had been cautious too long.

The homesteader leaped to his feet, bent low in a crouch, and made for the short distance to Munson. But the outlaw was too fast. He twirled his coat spinning and a sixgun covered Will's middle. Merritt stopped dead.

Munson's blunt features showed increased alertness.

"This he-sheep is more man than I figured," he muttered, mainly to himself. "But you got to die, hombre, you know that, don't you?"

In three quick steps the outlaw reached Jessica. He pulled her behind him, spinning her by one wrist. Will thought he saw a grimace of pain cross Jessica's eyes.

She was breathing heavily.

Now Munson moved toward Will, slowly, purposefully. His eyes, Indian-like, never seemed to blink.

"I ought to shoot you, homesteader," Munson gritted, "but we don't want to bring the law and Jake on us together. One thing at a time, I always say. One thing at a time—"

He moved closer all the time, the brand ready to swing and the sixgun leveled.

To Will it seemed the end. He stood rooted. His breath came in painful jerks and hot beads of sweat burned in his eyes. This was it then, after all of the war. Deep down within the homesteader betraying fingers of panic were working up to the outside. Will wanted to run but his whole back tingled at the thought of it. Munson moved nearer—and nearer. And Will stayed rooted.

Suddenly three distant sixgun reports sounded, sharp and clear on the eastern trail. For an instant the scene at the fire was immobilized. The three of them stood motionless like stone.

"The law!" Munson said, and no more.

It was Jessica who came out from behind the hulking form of the outlaw. Like an agile young cat she was on him. Both hands shoved at his gun hand.

"Now, Will," she sobbed. "Now. Now!"

Merritt rushed forward, aiming for the gunman's jaw. He barely saw Munson flick Jessica to the ground striking her a glancing blow with the smoking brand.

Will's first punch landed before the outlaw had collected himself. It was a clumsy punch but a hard one, with all of Merritt's big body behind it and it landed solidly. Munson sprawled and his six-gun twirled, glittering, into the dark, just beyond the firelight's edge.

Will went after the downed man and caught a great hob-heeled boot up high on one thigh, close onto the groin. The homesteader half spun, stumbled and caught himself. Munson, his mouth bloody, scrambled wildly to get to his feet. Will gauged him and went up in the air, landed in the small of the gunman's back, winding him, but not badly enough. Merritt tried to ride him, to stay on top, but the outlaw had fought too much and knew too much. The two big men rolled in the dust. They threw short and vicious punches, they bit, their knees bumped and the breath was torn out of them in rasping, saw-edged gasps.

For an instant the two were locked face to face, every muscle strained, necks corded and taut. Munson's eyes bulged, his forehead scars were livid, he smelled pungently of horses and sweat. Then his frantic, grasping fingers found the smoking brand.

WILL KNEW the blow was coming. He threw out a guarding arm. It was too late. The homesteader knew a momentary flash of blinding pain, then the whole world seemed to be gray and he seemed to move in it slowly, behind his thoughts, like a man moving in water.

Merritt knew vaguely that the gunman had left him and he saw his shapeless form searching desperately on all fours, just outside the fire's circle of light, for the missing sixgun.

Somehow Will pulled himself to his feet, still slow and unsteady. Beside him was the body of the murdered *bandido*. It was then that Merritt's eye fell on the jutting handle of the *bandido's* sixgun.

In one movement he stooped low and scooped it into one hand. In the shadows the outlaw's figure still groped frantically.

The .44's handle was strange to Will's palm and he felt the trigger's flatness against his forefinger. Pull it, he told himself. You got to pull it. But he couldn't. Somewhere between his mind and his gun hand was the Spirit Rebel. It wasn't that his gun hand stiffened. It simply seemed no part of him, but something floating there that a man could look at but not move.

Now Munson seemed to have found something. He jumped to it and the homesteader knew what it must be. Still the sixgun pointed silent. Now the gunman had his weapon. Will heard his hoarse cry of triumph as he spun to use it.

Then everything in Merritt's life was the muzzle-eye of the outlaw's sixgun, enormous in the light of the fire's dying embers.

The night dissolved in rocking explosion. . . .

WILL MERRITT regained consciousness lazily the next morning, almost as though he had been plunged in a deep drunken sleep. The Conestoga towered above him and a warm morning sun was vaguely comforting. Nearby he heard a confused buzzing of voices, but they were sufficiently remote and failed to concern him. Will started to stretch and a tearing pain instantly caught him in the chest. A groan escaped his lips.

"Will," a voice said, "Oh, Will, you've come back to me."

Merritt realized then his head was in Jessica's lap. Tears streaked her face. Close by stood the lawman, Milt Brent.

"Will," Jessica sobbed, "I almost thought Frank Munson had killed you. If he had I would have wanted to die too."

"He near did kill me," Will said. "He would have if it hadn't been for you."

"I had to fool him. It was our only chance. I had to make him think—"

"I know," Will said. "You did what you had to do. Don't think about it any more. It's all over I guess?" He looked to the lawman for an answer.

"It's over," Brent said. "The gang is wiped out."

"Munson too?"

"Him too. I ran into a U. S. marshal's posse shortly after sundown. They said they were close to Munson and his outfit. I told them about you folks and we lit out as fast as we could. Too late though. When we hit your camp you and Munson had just shot it out. Frank Munson was mean and a good gun. He hurt you bad. But you went him one better. You hit him square through one eye."

"And the gold—?"

"Your wife turned it over to us last night. You folks will be glad to learn there's a two thousand dollar reward total for finishing Munson and the money's return. The marshal will see that you get it."

In spite of his weakness and the dull throb of his wound, Will Merritt knew honest contentment. It even seemed that he and the Ghost Rebel had signed a truce. Both of them had fought for what they felt was right and the Johnny had died along with a way of life. It was a big country, still one country. Wherever the Spirit Rebel roamed, maybe he would get to like it that way. Will hoped so.

Jessica's soft arms slid about his neck.

"Darling, we're over the Colorado line and there's water here. Perhaps this is it. Our place. Our homestead."

Merritt smiled.

"Perhaps so, Jess," he said. "Perhaps it is. Our sixgun homestead."

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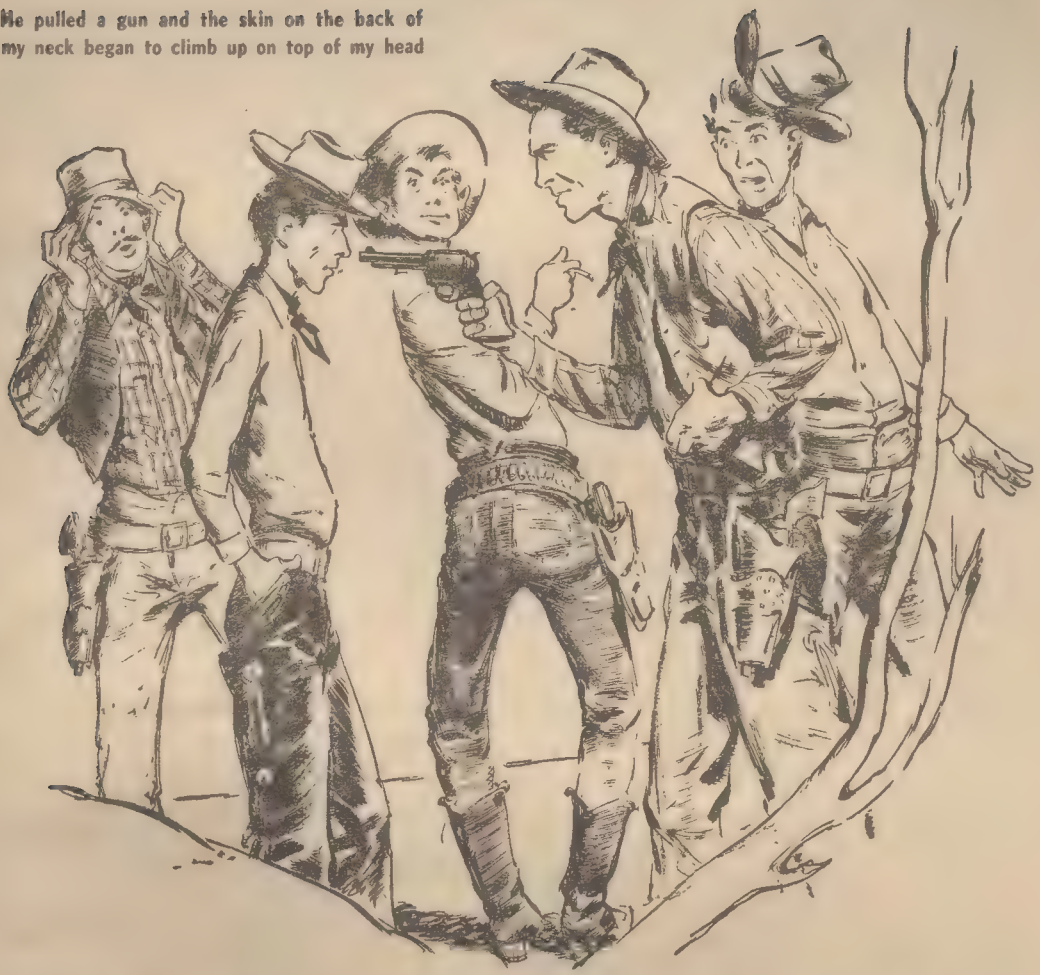
He pulled a gun and the skin on the back of my neck began to climb up on top of my head



The Near-Sighted Killer

By FRANK SCOTT YORK

Hawkeye Cousins' only trouble was he couldn't tell a bandit from a bolt of calico—without specs, that is

SOME men get pleasure from being law-chased. I guess they feel it gives them a glory and if they live to be old coots, they can sit around and listen to the songs about their crimes.

Not me, friend. My only crime was being nearsighted. I can't say I felt good about the snarly pictures of myself that used to hang on every tree and fence post in the Territory. The only reason I ever snarled in my life is because I can see a mite better with my eyes squinty.

This is what happened and I hope some dickey-bird politician reads it and decides

to do something. Maybe pass a law or two to set things straight and take the curse off'n a good name. A man on the run ain't no better than a prairie dog with tic, and I personally was afraid to take my boots off for so long I almost forgot the number of toes a man gets borned with.

I'd been in the Checker's Merchandise Store that black day, trying to steam up a little credit for a pair of wire-rim glasses; my eyes had gone read bad. I spoke five minutes with an upright bolt of calico thinking it was Old Man Checkers and I even admired the pretty vest he was wearing.

When a clerk finally did steer me to the old cheapskate, he allowed I could have a pair for four dollars, but at the mention of credit I found myself out on the boards with a lot of nasty words ringing in my ears.

My horse was tied up in front of the bank and I started across the street, squinting in the bright sun and reflecting how good for the soul a tall schooner of Pulley's beer would be.

I didn't really notice how quiet things was till I was on my horse. And then, they wasn't quiet any more.

Guns started blamming from the direction of the bank, and in ducking my head I saw I'd climbed up on the wrong horse. The one I was on was a bay all right, but where mine was a grandaddy this one was a skittery infant.

I never got the chance to climb down. A number of men ran out of the bank throwing lead up and down the street and my eyes wasn't so bad I couldn't make out the satchels of money they carried.

A BIG FELLER ran up to the horse and when he spotted me he cursed and leveled his Colt. But a bullet must have whanged off'n his elbow bone, for the gun dropped out of his hand and he cursed some more, and tried to pull me down from his horse.

And then I got foolish. I cussed right back at him and kicked at his head, determined to stay on that horse no matter who it belonged to. Once on the street I figured I'd be stomped six inches under dirt by all the bandits' horses. Horses generally won't stomp a man, but how was I to know if one or two wasn't as near-sighted as I am?

The big feller saw he was going to be left all alone if he didn't do something quick. The others were already saddled and cutting dirt. He ran around to my rear, and just as I spurred his horse—*whomp!*—he's riding in back of me, arms wrapped around my chest and screaming to move fast. He kicked his pony in the ribs so hard I could feel the critter's guts vibrating, and we was hell-for-holler off, bullets having a devil of a job just keeping up with us.

The big feller started to punch me in the back as soon as we cleared town.

I turned in my half of the saddle and hollered, "Now cut that out, stranger! A man could get hurt being tossed off a moving horse."

"Iff'n there's one thing I hate," he bellowed in my ear, "it's a no-good horse thief! I'm going to let you stay up here just to have the pleasure of killing you later!"

"I didn't know it was your horse!" I yelled back. "And you got no right calling me a thief when you just relieved a bank of all its assets. Including twelve thousand of my dollars." It weren't true, of course, but I can be right nasty when I set a mind to it.

"Do you know who I am?"

"No," I admitted, "and I'm willing to let it stay that way."

From the way the pony was moving I figured we was in the flats, heading for canyon country. I decided to stick that horse till the bitter end. What could be worse than a near-sighted man wandering around by hisself in the middle of a danged desert? I'll take a lungful of lead any time.

The big feller decided to introduce hisself anyway. "My name," he roared in my ear, "is Jigger Ashmeade. Does that mean anything to you, you little horse-thieving snake?"

Wandering around in the desert suddenly seemed like a great idea, after all, and I tried to slip off the horse, but Jigger's arms went around me and he yelled:

"No, you don't! I'm going to kill you slow and easy in my own way!"

Jigger Ashmeade! The Jigger from Dodge way—just about the dirtiest killer in the business. The talk was he notched the butts clean off three six-shooters before he was old enough to shave.

I tried to make it sound like I was a great admirer. "Why, Jigger, what you doing in Colorado Territory? I follow your career like you was a relative, and you're supposed to be in Kansas."

"I was!" he roared. "But a state is like a cow—once you milk it dry you look for another." He seemed to find this funny, and I tittered along with him so's to show I was a man of humor and respect.

But he stopped laughing and bunged me in the back with his fist. "You almost ruined my operation. Just you wait till you feel your ears being sliced off."

Four times during the rest of that long ride I tried to jump down from the horse, but the Jigger had arms like buffalo withers and all I got for my trouble was four splintered ribs. I finally gave up and spent the next two hours hoping old man Checkers's store would burn down, with him supplying the kindling.

CANYON country is something God slapped together to show man just who is Boss. We hit the foothills before sundown and it's just as well I couldn't see too well, because it would have convinced me of what I'd heard all my life —that there ain't a posse in creation could track anybody in all that rock.

The Jigger cussed the other riders on and after an hour of a stumbling climb which must have aged the horses considerably, we broke onto a shelf a mile or so square that was fairly level. I could see trees and smell water, so figured it for the hideout.

The horses slowed to a walk and the Jigger rasped in my ear, "Well, horsethief, we've reached your boothill."

The other riders pulled in close and one called, "Boss, who is that unhappy-looking guest of yours?"

"I don't know yet," Jigger said, "but he gets the same treatment as a lawman after the way he like to got me kilt or caught."

"I wouldn't do that, Jigger," I protested. "Being nearsighted, I just climbed the wrong horse, that's all."

Another rib got splintered. "Just you wait till my boys start climbing you."

We dismounted next to a shanty a dozen yards from a trickly stream. The air was sharp and dry. Nose tickly. I sneezed without realizing the Jigger had stepped in front of me. He wiped his jaw, cussed, and rammed me back into a tree. The other men circled around, and I had a hunch they was grinning. It made me mad, and I climbed back on my feet and swung from the boots at what appeared to be a tall, dirty-looking outlaw. It was a tree and I like to broke my hand.

Jigger roared with laughter and moved in close to me. Close enough for me to see the blue-black beard and rattler-cold eyes. "Danged if you wasn't telling the truth. You are weak-eyed."

"That's right," I said, sucking on knuckles, "but I can lick any man I can see."

"Can you see me?"

"You're as blurry as ten drinks on an empty belly." No sense telling him he was uglier than his pictures. Not yet, anyway.

He held his hand in front of my face and waggled his fingers. "Can you see that?"

"Sure," I said. "One of your men is holding his foot in my face."

Jigger looked thoughtful. "It's my opinion you're as harmless as an owl in sunlight, but I want to be sure."

He pulled his gun and the skin on the back of my neck started to climb up atop my head, but I kept an easy face. The gun centered on my left eye, moved to the right, then lifted to my forehead. Nobody spoke. I could see his finger start to whiten on the trigger, and I said as mildly as I could:

"What time is grub, fellers?"

The Jigger snorted under laughter of the others and pulled the trigger. A breath from hell singed the side of my face and carried off a quarter inch of ear lobe. The laughter turned to howls as I stumbled around deciding whether or not I was dead.

"You're lucky, stranger," Jigger drawled. "If a bullet hadn't skinned my elbow back in town, you'd sure be dead."

I held my torn ear and snarled, "I only asked a simple question."

"What's your name?"

"John Cousins," I answered. "And I demand to be released."

"Well, John Cousin," Jigger sneered, "looks as though you've got yourself a new profession. We're in need of a grub wrassler and pot walloper for as long as we're holed up, and I'd say you fit the bill."

"I don't know a bean from a barrel," I said weakly.

"Are you disputing me, Hawkeye?"

"No, I'm just warning you. Look, you fellers know how poorly my eyes are. Why not let me go? Just point me toward town and I'll take my chances. I ain't cut out for an outlaw life."

BUT the Jigger had spoken and the other men drifted off toward the stream with the horses.

"Hawkeye," Jigger said thoughtfully, rubbing his ugly jaw, "a tab like that will get you a reputation real soon. I got an idea."

"I don't want to hear it," I said emphatically. "It's bound to mean more trouble than I already got."

"Yeah," Jigger said, getting excited, "I been pushing my luck too long. Iff'n I was to be kilt, and a new man was to take my place — somebody unknown, somebody with a terrifying name like Hawkeye Cousins—"

"I don't follow you, Jigger," I said uneasily.

He grinned at me. A thin-lipped, wolfish grin. "Just watch." He cupped his hands over his mouth and bellowed, "Boys! Get back here."

They drifted back curiously. Jigger looked around, still grinning, and singled someone out. "Salter, you almost ruined our chances today."

Salter appeared to be a tall, gangly feller with small, mean eyes. His jaw hung a moment, and he said, "What you mean, Boss? I rode right along and even shot up one of them bank clerks."

"Yeah," Jigger said softly, "but you didn't seem to have your heart in it."

His draw was almost leisurely but the four shots tumbled one after the other, almost too fast to count. I hadn't got too good a look at Salter's face and never would now, 'cause there wasn't much face to get a look at. He went over backwards like a plank in a windstorm. The other men mumbled and fell back, eying Jigger uneasily.

The Jigger blew his gun and put it away. "Rest easy, boys," he drawled, "I just can't stand a man that don't put his mind to his work. Besides, ever' last one of you owed Salter poker money and I done you a favor." The grin returned, colder and dirtier than before. "And you know why?"

They shook their heads dumbly, some looking down in horror at poor Salter.

Jigger walked over and prodded the corpse with his boot. "You will notice," he orated, "this Salter has pretty much the same build as me. In fact, except for his face, he could pass for me. Now, as long as he ain't got no face any more and if he was dressed in my clothes, carrying my guns and dumped a mile from town, he *would* be me. To the law, anyway."

Some were beginning to grin. Not me. I had a hunch and it was jerking the flesh of my face like it was caught in a wire fence.

Jigger turned to me. "With me dead, you boys will need a new boss-man and here he is—Hawkeye Cousins. Soon, all them pictures of me will be torn down from the post-offices and hanging-size trees. A new picture will go up, and guess who it will be?"

They was the laughenest bunch of dirty outlaws this side of hell. They rolled in

the grass, pounded Jigger on the back, and broke out bottles of whisky.

I stood there, the breath whistling through my nose, and an anger growing in my chest till it almost choked me. I watched helplessly while Jigger stripped down to the buff and the others did the same for poor Salter. They dressed the dead man up like he was Jigger, guns and all, and when they were through I felt even worse. Jigger wore army britches and a yellow kerchief, and sure enough when they was on the corpse, it looked so much like Jigger it was hard to believe it wasn't.

JIGGER scratched the hair on his chest enjoyably and said, "Okay, load him on my horse. Lou, you and Harvey ride back to town after dark and leave the body close enough to town to be found first thing in the morning." The two men were saddled up when Jigger said, "Hold on a minute. Get me paper and a pencil."

"What you going to do now?" I asked unhappily.

"Write a letter to the law," Jigger said softly: "to give that reputation of your'n a little push in the right direction."

It took five minutes to find a man that could write, not counting me, and I wasn't volunteering.

"Write this," Jigger said thoughtfully. "To the Law: You wanted the Jigger a long time. Well, here he is, deader than the forty-seven men he kilt in his time. The Jigger got too big for his britches and there weren't room for the two of us." He grinned at me. "Sign it, 'John Hawkeye Cousins,' and draw a couple of skulls underneath."

"That's forgery," I said weakly.

"It sure is, Boss," someone said solemnly.

I saw he meant me, and groaned.

"Of course you boys realize," Jigger said softly, "that this new setup don't change nothing except my clothes. I'm still giving the orders."

They nodded hastily.

"The law's going to have a big printing bill. Hawkeye, your face is going to be as popular and well-known as castor-oil."

I nodded dumbly, but didn't want to believe it.

But for once in his life, Jigger spoke plain truth. . . .

It took three weeks for the law to swaller the Jiggers bait whole. I had hopes they'd see through his scheme, but I hadn't counted on how badly they wanted to believe Jigger really *was* dead.

Harvey rode into camp with the bad news. He was just a kid with an innocent baby face, and the Jigger sent him into Canyon City once a week for grub. He had a newspaper with him and when I got close enough to see the grin on his innocent baby face I knew I was going to need more than hope from here on.

They spread the paper out under a tree and admired the picture of me on the front page. It took up a lot of space, and had been drawn from an old tintype taken back in St. Lou. It scared even me. I had to admit I looked like a cold-blooded killer the way the artist had drawn mean lines down from my squinty eyes. Actually, I'd been smiling at the time, but somehow the smile was a snarl, and all in all it looked as though I wanted to eat little children and kick old women.

I read only the first part of the story about me. It was enough.

GREAT DECEPTION.
LOCAL MAN EXPOSED AS
LEADER OF INFAMOUS JIGGER GANG

And underneath:

John Hawkeye Cousins is the object of a statewide manhunt after this vicious and surly killer murdered Jigger Ashmeade, Kansas outlaw, in what was evidently a dispute over the spoils of the recent Canyon City National Bank holdup. Local residents and merchants remember Cousins as a deceptively mild-appearing man, with the exception of a few who recall Cousins had a vicious and blood-chilling countenance when angered. Sheriff Gage says three separate posses are scouring the Territory from here to the foothills in a grim effort to bring the murdering dog to justice.

That "murdering dog" thing had me

stumped for a moment till I saw I was accused of killing the three bank clerks. Eyewitnesses had seen me through the bank window as I shot them while casually sitting my horse, with my dastardly accomplices looting the tills.

I STUMBLED away from the outlaws and went back to the shack. Jigger followed me to see I didn't try to hightail. I was feeling under my bunk when he came in.

"If you're looking for that gun you hid," he drawled, "I took it five minutes after you put it there. Matter of fact, I was two feet away when you sneaked in here and lifted it from Salter's saddlebag."

"The curse of being weak-eyed," I said heavily.

He pushed me down on the slats. "You're a big man, Hawkeye. It's what I figured on, but it kind of makes me mad, the law thinking a runt like you could outdraw me."

"You'll remember," I snapped, "I wanted no part of it. Now I'll never be able to show my face with honest men again. They'll seed me with lead like I was a field at planting time."

Jigger nodded. "And it's time to do a little seeding ourselves. I'm getting tired of this place. We're going to pull another job and hightail out of the state. I hear they's a gold rush further along, and I aim to get a fair share of whatever comes up out of the ground."

"You mean," I asked incredulously, "you're going to turn honest and leave me in this mess?"

"I ought to kill you for thinking a lie like that," Jigger snarled. "My fair share will come from the banks after it's dug up. And you will ride with us, building up that reputation of your'n till you get too hot to carry any more. Then I'll dump you just like I dumped poor Salter."

"You're pretty smart," I admitted. "Only I always figured you relished all the talk about you."

Jigger looked sly. "Don't you worry about that, Hawkeye. It'll all come out one day, after I retire and disappear for good. The stories and songs about me then will make this Bill The Kid appear like a mewling infant. Which he is."

I wasn't in a mood to discuss professional jealousies. I ran a sweaty hand through my hair. "You mean, I got to ride with you this next job?"

"You're the boss-man, ain't you?"

"Ain't you afraid I'll mess things up, my eyes being what they are?"

Jigger snorted. "Don't worry. You won't get the chance. You'll just sit on your horse and shoot up the street while me and the boys take care of the business end."

I took a deep breath. "Another bank?"

He slammed me on the back. "The first time in history the very same bank was held up twice within one month!"

"Jigger," I yelped, "that don't make sense!"

"It makes sense for just the reason that it don't make sense. They don't expect it at all, and by the time the law finds out lightning *can* clobber the same tree twice, we'll be on our way west."

"And they'll be painting horns on my pictures," I groaned.

"Exactly," Jigger said with satisfaction.

Once the Jigger made up his mind, things moved fast. The second raid was set for the following day and we spent the afternoon breaking camp and oiling up the guns.

After grub, I was smoking a sad cigarette and reflecting on my unhappy predicament. It appeared my only chance was to make a break for it. With the law convinced I was a murdering dog, there was only the choice of sticking with the skillet or jumping into the fire.

Harvey wandered over. He helped me sometimes with the pots and hollered me away from the trees I was always walking into.

"Help you, Hawkeye?" he asked.

"I'm finished, boy," I answered heavily. "More ways than one."

He coughed nervously. He wasn't a bad kid. Just fell on evil companions and I don't think he liked it much.

"I'm going to trust you, Hawkeye," he said softly. "I'm cutting out at dawn. California, I guess. Seems to me, there ain't much future in this line of work."

"You're plumb right," I said fervently, shaking his hand.

HE REACHED inside his shirt, looked around and pulled out a brand new .44. "Here, hide this. That rusty old horse pistol Jigger intends giving you won't even fire."

"Harvey, boy," I breathed, sliding the gun down into my boot, "hereafter I look on you as my own flesh and blood."

"'Course, with your eyes, it probably won't help much," Harvey sighed, "but it's all I can do. I don't like the way they ride you. If you get close enough to Jigger, remember he shoots for the head every time. Duck down before you throw lead."

I nodded, touched at his concern. "Where you going in California, Harvey? Maybe—maybe when and if I get out of this fix, I'll join you."

His face brightened. "Would you, Hawkeye? I'd be pleased to have you for a pard. Reckon you'll find me in the gold fields."

I took his hand and pumped it, hobbling a little because of the gun in my boot. "Boy, I'll be there if there's any breath in me."

"Good luck, Hawkeye." He bit his lip. "You'll sure as hell need it."

I lay awake all night, and just before dawn, I heard Harvey leading his horse out of camp. I sure would have liked to leave with him, but we both knew with my eyes and the darkness I'd probably step right on Jigger's middle.

Nobody missed the boy till we was saddled up in the cold, early dawn. Then the Jigger ranted and cussed for five minutes, and told us all what he would do to the kid some day, but somebody pointed out it was one less split of the loot, and Jigger cheered up a bit.

We rode hard and fast, as Jigger's plan called for us to hit Canyon City the same time as the bank opened. From the swelling in my boot, I thought sure the gun would be discovered so I had a story dreamed up about busting my ankle on a stone. Nobody noticed, however, and shortly before we hit town, Jigger dropped back and handed me the most undangerous-looking weapon I ever saw. The hammer was rusted solid to the chamber and the bullets was so old they was froze solid in the piece.

Jigger grinned at me and shouted, "I hope you repay my trust in you, Hawkeye!"

I thought of my boot and managed to grin back. "I reckon you'll be repaid all right, Jigger."

The fireball sun was poker-hot when we rode into Canyon City. There was no pretense of being anything except the Hawkeye John Cousins gang — Jigger made me take the lead. I could hear my name yelled and could imagine people scurrying into the buildings like rabbits. And I must have looked the part of a killer from squinting left and right for bearing.

One woman howled, "It's the Hawkeye!" and I was so mortified I snarled at her.

We pulled up in front of the bank and the men ran into the bank after sending a spray of bullets up and down the street to discourage sightseers. Jigger shouted for me to stay on my horse.

I bent low over the horse's neck and pulled the gun from my boot. But when I looked around I knew it was hopeless. I could just about make out the barrel of the gun.

Then I had me an idea.

I jumped down, faced in the general direction of Checkers Merchandise Store, stooped low, and ran like hell. I ran into a hitching post, looped over it and banged my chin on the board sidewalk, but I was in front of the store and I crawled in on my hands and knees.

I recognized Old Man Checker's voice. "Gawd-a-mighty! Don't shoot, Hawkeye! In the name of mercy—"

I spotted him behind the counter and pointed the gun.

"Do I get credit, or don't I?" I yelled.

"All you want," he shrieked. "Only don't shoot, man!"

"Hand me a pair of them four-dollar spectacles and be quick."

THE old feller was so scared the first pair he picked out of the box broke in his hand. He thrust the box at me and I fumbled around, put a pair on my nose. They was tight, and I had to mouth-breathe. I opened my eyes.

Glory! Old man Checkers was just as ugly as I'd figured, and his scared face appeared to be inched from mine. Every bin and bolt in the store jumped out at me just as clear as paint! I looked down at my feet and from the closeness of the floor I thought I was twelve inches high.

"Please get out," Checkers whispered. "Don't shoot, Hawkeye!"

"Shoot you!" I yelled happily. "Man, I'd like to kiss you!"

This was too much for Checkers. He moaned, turned white as snow and disappeared behind the counter. I could hear shooting from inside the bank, and they sounded like farewell shots.

The first of the outlaws had reached their horses when I hit the street. They saw me, gaped, and swung their guns on me. But I felt so good with my new eyes; and they was so close up, I couldn't miss. I dropped three of them with snap shots and continued across the street, climbed my horse.

I got two more coming out of the bank. Then Jigger came out, jumping over the bodies, his eyes fierce and burny over the red silk mask. Two more men followed him, dropping the money bags and running to horse.

Jigger looked up at me, saw first the gun, then the spectacles. He ripped off the mask and howled bad words at me and dodged down the front of the bank throwing lead my way.

But he was so rattled, for once he missed. Just as he neared an alley, my three bullets smacked into his chest and he sat down hard, blood oozing down over his gunbelt. His eyes, still on me, glazed over but he died with the hate on his face, frozen.

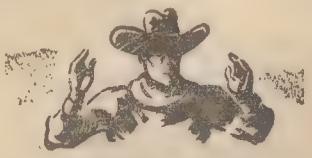
Somebody else's bullets was playing hell with the two last outlaws. They was crouched low, shooting upstreet, and then I became aware of the lead that whipped all around me, tore up splinters from the boards and ate holes out of the bank front.

I turned, and there was a line of men strung out and firing as they came.

I waved friendly-like to make them quit, then I heard Sheriff McCreedy bellow:

"Take the Hawkeye alive, men! His neck is for a rope, the dirty, killing dog!"

Then the two men in front of me saw



me waving to the sheriff like I was inviting him up to the bar and they turned their attention my way. A slug creased my neck, and at the same time one of the sheriff's men put a sideways part in my hair. So I cut out.

I threw the empty gun away, tucked the specs down in my boot so's they wouldn't be shot off, and rode that horse out of town and clean to his knees. With the price on my head doubled and the name of Hawkeye John Cousins to be sang in the same breath with Bob Dalton, the James boys and other unpopular citizenry.

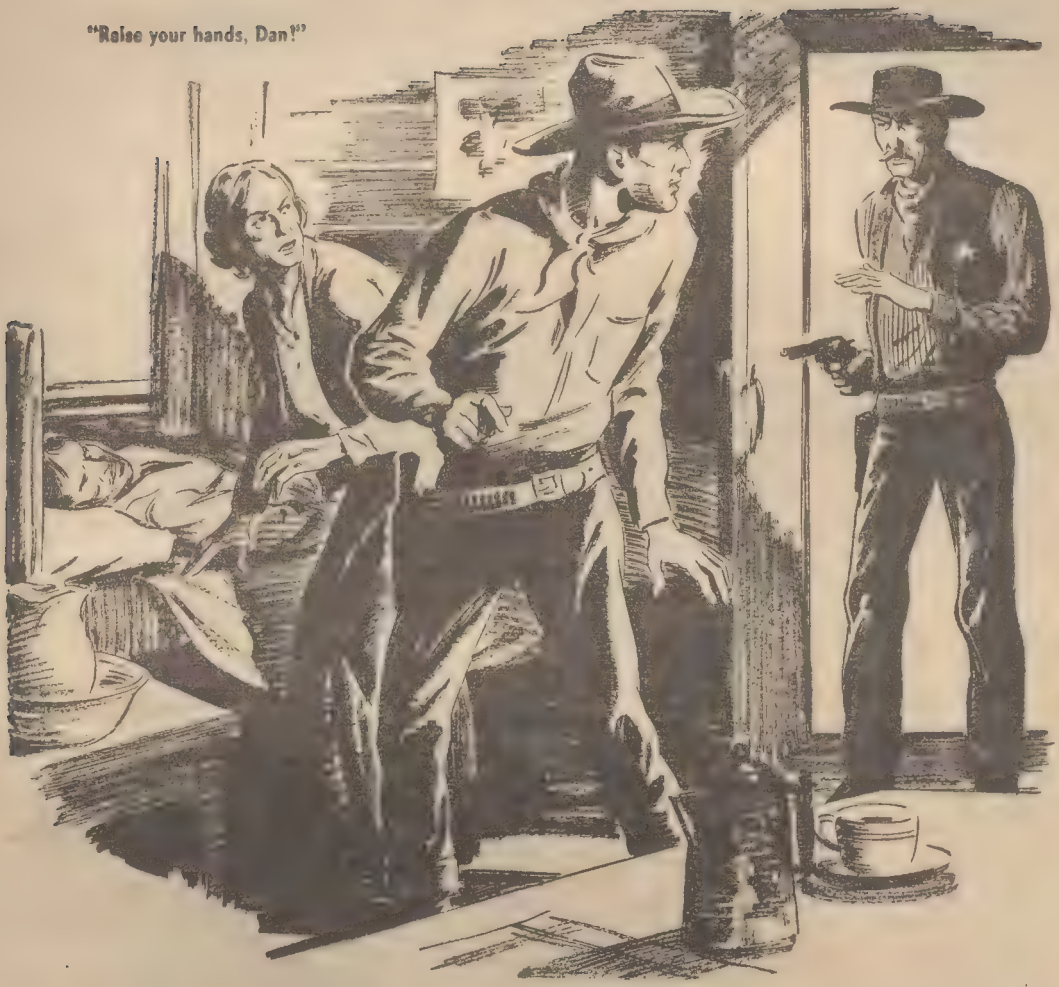
The law was even more impressed when they found Jigger's body, and concluded I was man enough to take over while he lived.

I didn't have my boots off till I hit California.

Harvey was real glad to see me, though the boy seemed to think my predicament amusing. Not that he laughed out loud; he was too polite.

But with my specs on I can see him grinning at me from a hundred yards. He looks only five feet away.

And by the way. We still ain't found any gold. ● ● ●



"Raise your hands, Dan!"

MAN ON THE RUN

By

PHILIP MORGAN

DAN LARKIN rode slowly down the drowsy main street of Three Forks, a young man, tall and lean and thin-hipped, born to the saddle. His range clothes were frayed and his gunbelt was almost white with age. The walnut butt of a .45 showed above the top of a worn holster. But the horse he rode—a big Morgan black—was one of the finest in Antelope County. He represented all of value that Dan Larkin had left. Hugo Meers, the banker, had his ranch and his cattle, but he hadn't got the Morgan horse.

Dan was passing Sheriff Milo Franks'

With a sheriff like Milo Franks on your trail, you didn't stop for anything, Dan Larkin knew . . .

office when the big lawman stepped out to hail him.

"Hold up a minute, Dan. I want to talk to you."

Dan reined over and pulled up in front of the sheriff. He shoved his hat back and leaned forward, arms folded across the saddle-horn. He grinned at this old friend of his.

"What's on your mind, Milo?" he asked innocently. Franks had known Dan Larkin from birth. He and Dan's father had ridden together. He advised young Dan now in a friendly voice:

"Kid, I just want to warn you not to have any trouble with Hugo Meers, no matter what he's done. If you was to kill him, I'd have to hunt you down and I sure wouldn't want to do that."

"I won't kill him, Milo. Why, I don't mean him no harm at all." There was an easy grin on Dan's face and laugh wrinkles around his blue eyes.

But Milo regarded him uneasily. He knew the Larkin men. The devil always lay close behind their laughter.

"Don't do anything at all that'll put me on your trail, boy," the sheriff said, and turned back into his office.

Dan sat up and rode on down the street. His expression was serious now, and he felt bad. He hated to do anything to worry Milo Franks, but Hugo Meers owed him ten thousand, two hundred and forty-six dollars, and twenty-nine cents the way he figured it, and Hugo was going to pay.

Of course, that greedy banker wouldn't pay willingly and there was the rub. For Dan had no legal claim whatsoever on Hugo Meers. But he had a moral claim, and in Dan's book that was just as good.

DAN reined up in front of the Star Saloon and sat the Morgan for awhile, watching the street and thinking. He recalled last spring, how dry it had been, and how he had needed money to sink two wells on the Lonesome Hills land he had inherited from his father. He had been so sure that if he could sink the wells, the land would support more cows, and instead of just making a living he might make a pretty good profit.

Fact was, he had been so plumb sure of it that he had come to Three Forks and talked it over with Hugo Meers. That was right after Meers had showed up hereabouts and bought the bank from old Ben Meachem's estate. Hugo had liked Dan's idea, sure, had declared it was sound.

He'd agreed to loan Dan five thousand dollars and take his note, due a year from date, and had been mighty quick to declare the note was just a formality, that of course it would be renewed at the end of the year when Dan paid the interest. Trouble was, everything he'd said was just talk, and that note had been in writing.

Dan had been brought up to believe that a man's word was as good as his writing and had thought nothing of it. But at the end of the year—a month ago—he hadn't been able to pay off the note, Hugo Meers had foreclosed on his ranch. Now Dan was off the ranch where he had been born. In the last month he had figured it all up as near as he could—what Hugo Meers' swindle had cost him. He figured the ranch and stock to be worth ten thousand, two hundred and forty-six dollars, and twenty-nine cents.

After a few moments Dan swung down from the Morgan and went into the Star. Charlie Sands, the owner, was behind the bar and greeted Dan with little interest. Charlie was a politician, and right now Dan was on the outside.

"What'll it be, Dan?" he asked carelessly.

"Just a beer, Charlie." Dan took the beer to a table near the window, picked up a deck of cards and laid out a hand of solitaire. In fifteen minutes he saw Sheriff Milo Franks leave his office, mount, and ride unhurriedly from town. This was the day that Milo made his twice monthly call on Antelope County's other town, Benson, which was twenty miles north of Three Forks.

Dan watched the sheriff ride away with mixed feelings. Everything was working out just right, yet he didn't feel too good about it somehow.

He sat at the table for four hours. He

drank a few beers and played solitaire endlessly. At noon, he rose from the table and sauntered from the saloon. Untying the Morgan, he led the horse down the street to the Rancher's Trust and Savings Bank and tied the black to the rack with a slip-knot. Then he walked casually into the bank.

There was no one in the teller's cage, which was as he had expected. Johnny Kilpatrick always went out for dinner from twelve to twelve-thirty, when Hugo Meers tended the bank alone. Dan walked softly back toward the private office. The door was ajar, and Dan looked in. Meers was sitting in his swivel chair, his hands folded comfortably across his big paunch, his breathing almost a snore.

Dan stepped into the office and pulled his gun.

"All right, Meers, wake up."

Meers snorted and raised one hand to paw at his face. His eyes popped open and then he was staring, with shock, at the gun in Dan Larkin's hand. His double chin began to quiver and fear that was like a sickness showed in his pale eyes.

"Don't shoot, Larkin! For God's sake, don't shoot!"

"I ain't going to shoot as long as you do like you're told," Dan growled. "What I want is for you to get me ten thousand, two hundred and forty-six dollars, and twenty-nine cents and put it in a bag. Move lively—and don't try anything, or I will drill a hole in your mangy hide."

MEERS hoisted himself from his chair with great difficulty, a suddenly old fat man. He moved cautiously around Dan and out into the bank to the big safe. He took several minutes opening it and when Dan, standing behind him, saw the banker's back stiffen he knew what Meers was thinking.

"Don't try it, Meers," he snapped. "Sure—I know there's a gun in there, but just don't try to grab it."

That took all the starch out of Hugo Mears. He turned around with his hands full of bank notes, but Dan ordered, "Just count out what I said, no more, no less."

Meers fumbled his way through the greenbacks and finally got the correct amount in everything but change. He had to go to the teller's cage for the twenty-nine cents. He dropped the entire amount in a leather bag and handed it to Dan with shaking hands.

"They'll get you for this, Larkin!" he declared hotly. Since Dan hadn't killed him and didn't look as if he meant to, Meers was recovering a little of his lost courage.

"Maybe," Dan said. "Get on back to the office now."

He pushed Meers into the office at gun point and tied him to his chair with the cord from the window shade. After he had gagged the banker with the man's own handkerchief, he strode from the bank. Dan Larkins' maiden attempt at bank robbery had taken less than ten minutes. Outside, he threw a quick glance both ways along the street before he stowed the money in his saddle-bags, rose to the leather, and rode out town, heading for Utah and safety.

Once out of sight of town, Dan lifted the Morgan to a lope. Hour after hour he rode on this way, running his mount, then walking him. When he finally came out onto level ground he crossed it and rode on higher with the mountains. From each vantage he reached he scanned his back trail, but saw no signs of pursuit. He knew now that Milo Franks was going to take the trail eight hours late, and no horse would ever catch up with the Morgan after the black had a start like that. Dan didn't believe anybody in town except Milo would be interested in chasing him. Hugo Meers wasn't liked and Dan Larkin always had been—least up to now.

He patted the money in the saddle-bags and took a hard satisfaction from knowing that in taking it he had hurt Hugo Meers where he lived. The banker was a man to whom money was everything and this loss would sting him.

Dan's conscience was giving him some trouble, as it had all the while he had been planning the robbery, but he ignored it. He kept telling himself that this money

was no more than he had coming. There was a right way and wrong way to do business and Meers had used the wrong way. Of course he had to be forced to pay back what he had as good as stolen.

Dan rode until midnight, then made cold camp. With luck, he would reach the Utah border by nightfall the next day. Once over the border, he would be all right, as long as he stayed out of Wyoming, and he sure had no intention of returning. There was good land in Utah. He meant to find a piece of it, stock it with good beef and start all over again. It wouldn't be easy, but he had never wanted it easy.

After a meager meal of cold biscuits and jerky he stretched out with his hands under his head, with his saddle for his pillow. Looking up at the bright stars overhead, shining with glittering brilliance, he had one constantly recurring thought—of Milo Franks. And as he thought of his sheriff friend it was with a good deal of regret. To Milo the law was black and white, and he would always consider Dan worthless for having broken it.

That was the one thing about this whole business that bothered Dan. He was still thinking of the sheriff when he fell asleep.

IN THE gray light of dawn, Dan Larkin ate a couple more biscuits and had a long drink from a nearby stream, then he rode out. He was coming out of the hills now into a more level area, a parched land that fell away gradually to the Utah border.

In mid-morning he saw the cabin, outbuildings and corrals of a small ranch. He had been passing cattle, lean, hungry critters that foraged through a land barely able to sustain them. He swung the Morgan wide around the ranch, to pass without stopping. He was ahead of Milo Franks, but he didn't know how far, and he intended to stay ahead.

He was abreast of the ranch and a mile to the east of it when he saw a rider coming at breakneck speed. A quick fear gripped him, then he realized that anyone living on this remote ranch could have no word of the robbery in Three Forks and he reined in.

The rider, coming closer, turned out to be a woman. She was riding a man's saddle, like a man, her skirt hiked over her skinny knees. She was tall and thin and homely, her skin beaten to the same gray as this dead land. But in spite of that, there was strength in her bony face, which might have been born of a perpetual hope for something better that had never been realized. When she pulled up beside Dan he saw the plain fear on her face.

"Thank God!" she said breathlessly. "Stranger, I need help bad. My man went out yesterday to bring some cows in off the lava and he ain't back. He was supposed to get back last night and he never stays away all night. Something's happened to him! I tried to follow his trail, but couldn't. You've got to help me!"

She was holding herself together by sheer will, and Dan saw how near she was to hysteria.

"I'm mighty sorry, ma'am," Dan said, and he was sorry, "but I can't stop. There'll be a man along here some time today and you'll have to wait for him."

He glanced along his back trail uneasily. The woman saw the glance.

"Oh," she said, "so you're one of them. I'd never have guessed it." She turned her horse back toward the ranch, her shoulders hunched in defeat.

What she had said had stung Dan. He wanted desperately to explain to her how he had come to be a fugitive, and why he couldn't stop—not with twenty years in prison staring him in the face. He had to keep going. He wanted to explain it all to her, but he felt sure she wouldn't understand.

He put the Morgan forward, trying not to look at the beaten figure of the woman. But he had ridden only a hundred yards when he hauled up and swung his horse around to intercept her. When he rode alongside, she looked at him, without hope and without feeling.

"Which way is the lava?" Dan asked, and cursed himself silently for a fool.

She showed him her man's trail. It led

straight south from the ranch and was easy enough to follow. Dan pushed along at a fast pace, feeling the passing minutes slide away from him, almost hearing the hoofbeats of Milo Franks' horse pounding along his trail. Milo was grim and deadly on a chase, a man who never gave up a trail, and it wouldn't matter that he was trailing a close friend. He had warned Dan Larkin, and now he would be out to bring him in.

The trail soon left the ground and took to the hard lava. Black dust that shifted with every slight breeze covered this area and here there was no trailing from horseback. Dan dismounted and went on at a stooped walk, straining his eyes to see every little nick in the hard rock where a horse's hooves had scraped.

BUT NOW time didn't crawl; it raced. Tension began to mount unbearably within him and he yearned to give up this hunt and ride. But every time he had that thought he looked back at the woman and found her eyes on him, filled with a desperate hope. Each time he bent again to his task.

They were far out into the lava when the sun plunged from the sky and night came with amazing suddenness. Now there would be no trailing, yet they *had* to find him. If there was something really wrong with him he might not last much longer. So they rode in huge sweeping circles, stopping every hundred yards to shout, and listen for an answer. They had been at that for two hours when a weak voice answered Dan's shout. The voice came from their right and they went toward it at a walk, so they wouldn't miss him.

He was lying in a small open strip of ground off the lava. There were some stunted trees here. After the woman had tearfully greeted the man and rocked his head against her flat chest, Dan sent her to gather wood and build a fire, while he attended to the man. The man was skinny like his wife and he, too, was going on nerve.

"Where is it?" Dan asked.

"My leg. She's busted good, I'm afraid. I was riding after a steer and the horse shied at a rattler. I got thrown and lit wrong. I'm sure mighty pleased to see you, stranger."

"We'll have a look as soon as the fire's going and then we'll set it. It will be a little tough."

"After waiting this long, it'll be a cinch," the man said.

The fire was soon going and Dan had a look at the leg. It was broken, but the break wasn't too bad. The bone had not pierced through flesh and skin.

As Dan probed the leg there wasn't a whimper out of the injured man. Dan felt a sharp admiration for him. The woman was kneeling beside him, stroking his forehead and crooning to him softly as Dan found two good strong branches and cut them to the right length. Then he cut up the woman's saddle blanket into long strips, and was ready.

He gave the man a quick glance.

"This'll hurt some."

The man nodded and braced himself against his wife.

Dan pulled, and kept pulling hard while he set the bone in place. Sweat popped out on the man's forehead and his teeth made a grinding sound, but no words escaped him. Half-way through, his head rolled limply as he passed out. His wife held him and tears rolled down her face, but she, too, held silent.

It took Dan quite awhile to set the leg, apply the splints and bind the leg tightly. When he had finished, his hands were shaking and a cold sweat covered his entire body. He rose shakily and staggered away from the firelight and was sick.

Shortly the injured man regained consciousness, and Dan asked him, "Think you can stand a trip back to the ranch?"

"I sure can try," the man said. "Listen, stranger, the wife tells me you're on the dodge and there's a posse on your trail. Why don't you light out? We can make it back somehow."

Dan shook his head. "I've got time to take you home and still make it. They were a long ways behind me."

He was lying. Milo Franks would be

close now, and getting closer by the hour. But a man in the condition of this one couldn't be left here like this. The woman could never get him to the ranch unaided. The desert chill of night had cleared down over the lava beds, too, and as likely as not leaving a man suffering from a broken leg, and shock now also, would make him a prime target for pneumonia or something.

NO, DAN thought grimly, he had come this far, he would see this thing through, come hell or high water—or prison bars.

Dan brought up the Morgan, caught the injured man under the shoulders, lifted him and laid him across the saddle, belly-down. It would be uncomfortable riding, but his leg would hang straight and stay set.

The man groaned once, and that was all. The wife mounted her horse and Dan swung up behind her husband. He put the Morgan forward at a walk, knowing what pain every slight jolt would mean for the man. Yet through that long ride, the man said nothing.

With the true spirit of a pioneer Dan had to give it to him. He had plenty of sand.

After they had crossed the hard lava and reached softer ground, the jolts were not so stiff. They were not far from the ranch when the first red fingers of dawn poked up in the east. Dan could make out the ranch buildings, just a few miles ahead.

He swung his gaze slightly north, to the notch in the hills through which he had come. His eyes traveled down from the notch to the ranch, slowly, searchingly, but he saw no horseman. Relief welled up in him and he began to hope. If there was time to get the man to the ranch and get back aboard the Morgan, he would make it. Milo couldn't catch him in a straight race over flat country.

Riding into the barren yard of the ranch, Dan stopped in front of the cabin door. He jumped down, took the man in his arms and carried him inside the cabin as gently as he could. He laid his patient on the only bunk and straightened with a feeling of elation. He was going to make it, after all!

Right then Milo Franks' voice hit him and his hopes crashed.

"Raise your hands, Dan. Don't make any fast move."

Dan saw consternation and despair in the face of the injured man on the bunk, then turned himself to face Milo Franks, who stood just inside the cabin door with his .45 held at hip level. The look of hard travel was plain on him. Dan raised his hands and grinned wearily.

"You're a bearcat for sticking to a trail, Milo."

"I warned you not to bust the law, Dan," Milo answered regretfully. "Now I've got to take you in and see you sent to prison."

"That's your job. I knew you'd be coming."

"Reach down with your left hand and unbuckle your belt," the sheriff ordered.

"Why, you know I wouldn't draw against you," Dan said in some surprise.

"I didn't think you'd ever rob a bank, either," Milo said drily.

"You've got a point." Dan grinned again.

Carefully he unbuckled his gunbelt. It fell to the floor and Milo motioned him away from it with his gun-barrel. Dan moved and Milo picked up the gunbelt and hung it over his left arm.

"Let's go, kid."

Dan went out of the cabin with Milo right behind him. The woman followed them out, her eyes wide and sick with despair. Dan swung up on the Morgan.

"Where's the money?" Milo asked.

"Right here in the saddle-bags," Dan said, unbuckled them and tossed them to the sheriff.

"There's one thing puzzling me," the sheriff said. "Why did you take just that ten thousand and the odd dollars and cents?"

"That was all he owed me. He cheated me out of the ranch and that's what I figure the ranch was worth. The way I look at it, I had that money coming to me."

The woman came up to Franks then and

took his arm in a hesitant grip.

"Sheriff," she pleaded, "you can't take him in! You've got the money and that's all that matters. If it hadn't been for me and John, he'd be safe across the border by now. I stopped him to help me hunt for John and he did, knowing all the time you'd catch him. He found John and set his leg and brought him back here. That kind of man is no outlaw. Let him go!"

HER plea hit Milo Franks, but Dan had no hope that the sheriff would be swayed from his duty. Milo had been a lawman for thirty years and he had never shirked duty in all that time. To ask him to do it now was asking too much. Yet everything this woman said was true enough and her plea was based on reasonableness, not on feminine emotion. Milo Franks knew better than she did that Dan Larkin was no outlaw. He might even think Dan had been right in taking the money. But his duty was a yoke that held him helpless.

His face showed none of the turmoil in his mind, but both Dan and the woman sensed it and held silence. They respected the lawman and respected his sense of duty, no matter how hard.

When Milo Franks spoke, it was as though the words were dragged from his very soul.

"I never turned any man free unless I was forced, ma'am, and I'm too old to change my ways."

She sagged, and one small flame of hope that had kindled in Dan Larkin went out.

"Now," said the sheriff, "Dan and me are going down to the corral and get my horse and then we'll be back here to say so-long." He looked full at Dan. "I noticed you had a rifle standing there just inside the door."

He motioned, and Dan started the Morgan forward at a slow walk. The woman went into the cabin.

Milo took his time getting his gelding out of the lean-to. He saddled slowly, and refused to look at Dan until he had swung up. Then he nodded grimly and they walked their mounts back to the cabin. Milo hadn't held his gun on Dan since they had come out of the cabin. They stopped outside the door and Milo called:

"We'll be riding out."

The woman came from the cabin with the rifle at her shoulder and centered on Milo Franks. Her ready voice was high-pitched with excitement:

"You said you never turned a man free unless you was forced, Sheriff. I'm sorry, but you better raise your hands!"

Milo put up his hands, his face blank. Dan moved up beside him and took back his gun and belt. He buckled the belt on and reached out for the saddle-bags. Milo stared at him. Dan returned his gaze for a long time, his hand still on the saddle-bags. Finally he let go of the bags and shrugged resignedly.

Dan Larken wheeled the Morgan then, and went away from there at a hard run, bound for Utah and freedom. He turned once, when he was a mile from the ranch. The woman still held the gun on Milo Franks.

Dan waved and Milo waved back.

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The Play s the Thing

By BEN FRANK

He held up the shoes under Chin-nick's nose

As an actor Boo Boo Bounce made a fair sheriff—and vice versa

I AM eating my breakfast peaceful when my wife comes in, sets down the coffee pot no little bangy and says, somewhat unfriendly, "Hopewell, if it was not that our society leader, Mrs. Van-Uplift, is the president of the Polecat Little Theater Guild, I would not leave you go near the lodge hall to practice the play, 'Poor Little Rich Baby,' which that blond Miss Mona Moon, and her high-hat mamma, Mrs. Moon, are putting on tomorrow night, and no mistake!"

"But, my dear," I say, "I am not one of the actors. I am merely the prompter for Boo Boo Bounce. Besides, I hardly ever take my eyes off the play book to

look at Miss—"

"Why," my wife cuts in, indignant, "that bleached-haired hussy would choose a big fat numb-skull like Boo Boo to be the hero is more than I can understand. Boo Boo don't have brains enough to learn 'Little Bo Peep,' let alone a part in a play."

"That is hardly no proper way to speak of the sheriff of Coyote County and my boss," I murmur, me being the deputy sheriff of Coyote County, U. S. A.

"Haw!" she says, brittle. "Leave me tell you—"

That is when I put on my hat and depart, not being no hand to argue with my wife.

Just as I am about to head uptown, who should hail me from across the street but Grandma Grinder, with a shoe box under one arm. I step over to see what she wants and am no little astounded to find her gazing at me out of tearful eyes.

"Why, Grandma, what is the matter?" I ask.

"Little Sally Sue, my kitten, has up and died," she says, mournfully. "I have her wrapped up in this nice new shoe box and wish her buried on the old Grinder homestead in Dead Man's Canyon. Knowing you have a heart of gold, Hopewell, and are a public servant to boot, and me being too aged and decrepit to travel to Dead Man's Canyon, I am asking you to bury poor Sally Sue in some pleasant spot on the old homestead."

"Why, most certainly," I say, agreeable.

Utmostly touched by Grandma's grief, I take the box and go on to the post office.

"Hopewell," Mailman Moffet says, grinning curious, "what have you got in that box? A prisoner? Ha, ha!"

NOW a deputy sheriff does not care for it to be known he is toting around and about a dead kitten. So I say pleasant, "How did you ever guess it? Kindly hand over the mail."

He gives me a letter for Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce.

Coming to the jail, I open the office door careful and tiptoe in, for if Boo Boo is taking a nap, he does not like to be awakened sudden. However, he is wide-awake, setting in his swivel chair and twiddling his fat thumbs thoughtful, a faint scowl on his round pink face and blinking at a large woolly Teddy bear on his desk.

"Boo Boo," I say, surprised, setting down the shoe box and picking up the woolly bear, "I did not know you had any small relatives to buy a toy for."

"Ain't," he says grumpy. "It is for Mrs. VanUplift's baby granddaughter. Every time that kid sees me in the third act, she opens her big mouth and hollers bloody murder. Even if I am the hero and main actor, I cannot hardly insist that the baby be tossed out of the play, since Mrs. VanUplift is president of the Theater Guild. So maybe if I give the Teddy bear to this loud-mouthed baby, she will not bawl her head off when—what is in that shoe box, Deputy?"

"A dead kitten."

"What," he yells, his three chins quivering violent. "I know you are somewhat peculiar, Hopewell, but it never occured to me you would go around and about Polecat with a dead kitten in a shoe box."

I explain how I have promised Grandma to bury the kitten in Dead Man's Canyon, and add, "Now, if you will excuse me for a few hours, I will go and bury—"

But he stops me with a waggle of one fat thumb. "Grandma's kitten will have to wait. Right at the moment, I wish to run over my part in the play and need your assistance." And he goes on and says, smiling dreamy, "Deputy, who knows? When I become a world-wide renown actor, Miss Mona and I may—"

But at that moment, the door flies open, letting in Forty-rod Frye, staggering slightly and carrying a shoe box under one arm, also.

"Greetings and salutations," he says, with a slight hiccup. "Where at is the rest of the quartet, pray tell?"

"No-work Norton is still in Cell Number Two," Boo Boo says. "As for Nail-head Nutter and Bing-bong Beemer, they

ain't got here yet. Don't tell me you got a dead cat in that box, too?"

But before Forty-rod can get over being surprised at Boo Boo's question, Nail-head and Bing-bong arrive.

Now, Miss Mona and her mamma, who have come to Polecat to put on the play, want a sad song sung between the second and third acts by a male quartet. Bing-bong Beemer, the blacksmith, is a very strong basso. Nail-head Nutter, who runs the general store, is a loud baritone; and Forty-rod is a second tenor. But there is only one Polecatter who can sing a high tenor—namely, No-work Norton, who is serving a short term for stealing chickens, which is why the quartet has to practice in the jail until tomorrow evening when No-work will be let out to go to the lodge hall to sing.

"Leave us get busy," Bing-bong says.

"First," Forty-rod says, tapping a bony finger on his shoe box, "I wish to pick a crow with you, Friend Nail-head."

"Get to picking," Nail-head grumbles.

"These shoes you sold me yesterday are about two sizes too small. Now, a gent cannot sing on a stage in public if his shoes pinch."

"All right," Nail-head cuts in. "Instead of yapping your head off, bring 'em to the store and swap 'em for a larger pair. Leave us into No-work's cell, Boo Boo, so's we can practice."

"Go right on in," Boo Boo says. "I ain't bothered to lock No-work up since you practiced yesterday."

THEY go into the cell and begin to sing. But just as they get going good and strong, the door opens again, and who should hobble in but Canyon Cronk, a whiskery old coot who has lived alone in Dead Man's Canyon for fifty years, trapping and hunting and talking to himself most of the time.

He opens his mouth and speaks excitedly, but there is so much singing we cannot hear a word he says.

"Leave us go outside where it is quiet!" Boo Boo yells, shoving to his feet and waddling through the door.

We follow him, me shutting the door behind us.

"Now, what did you say, Canyon?" Boo Boo asks.

"Sheriff," the old gent says, his eyes blinking wild, "the ghost of Dead Man's Canyon has ariz to haunt me!"

"Prittle-prattle!" Boo Boo snorts, him not believing in ghosts, and thinking old Canyon is just more loco than usual.

"Boo Boo," the oldster says husky, "I seed strange lights in that old cabin where the dead man was found at many years ago. Also, I heared strange noises. I—"

"Canyon," Boo Boo cuts in, disgusted, "leave me smell your breath. Likely you have been drinking."

"That ain't no way to talk to a citizen and a voter." Canyon yells, furious. "If you don't investigate my ghost, come next election, I won't vote for you!"

"All right, all right," Boo Boo says, smiling pleasant. "Before the day is over, I personally will investigate."

This satisfies the old gent, who hobbles away brisk.

"Boo Boo," I say, "you know you ain't got time to ride to Dead Man's Canyon today."

"I know," Boo Boo says. "Anything to get rid of that crazy old—Is that a letter sticking out of your pocket?"

I give him the letter, which I had forgot about until now, and he rips it open.

"Oh, oh!" he says, his face turning somewhat pale. "Just when I am up to my neck in being a hero in a play, something like this would have to rear its ugly head!"

I glance over his shoulder and see the picture of a horse-faced gent, with a eggish-bald head and evil eyes, glaring back at me no little dangerous. What is printed below the picture is:

"WANTED, Touch-and-go Graham!"

It goes on to say that Touch-and-go is a very slick gent with a safe dial and it is thought he will be operating soon in our midst if we do not keep our eyes open very sharp.

"This is a pretty howdy-do, and no mis-

take!" Boo Boo grumbles. "I cannot understand why—"

He is interrupted by a rattle of boots along the board walk and, glancing up, who should we see but Mayor Mincemeat Malone and Judge Jackson, his shiny gold-headed cane flashing, coming our way no little brisk. And walking between them, scowling furious, is none other than Senator Loud-mouth Blout, who has returned to Polecat to mend his political fences before election time.

"Greetings, fellow party members," Boo Boo says hearty. "Leave me say it is a utmost pleasure to see you each and all."

"This is no time for idle words," the judge cuts in.

"I have been robbed," Senator Blout says, fingering nervous the gold watch chain across his checkered vest. "After eating breakfast, I went back to my room in the Polecat Hotel, and there was a second-story man with a gun in his fist. The next thing I knew, he had cabbaged onto a package of valuable personal papers and left me locked in my room. By the time I managed to get out, this gent had disappeared with no one having saw where he went. Shake a leg, Boo Boo, and go run down this desperado, pronto!"

"How can I run down a desperado who I have never laid eyes on?" Boo Boo says. "Besides—"

THE Senator exclaims, pointing a fat finger at the letter in Boo Boo's hand, "Ah, ha! There is the picture of the culprit who stole my papers!"

"What?" Boo Boo gurgles. "You mean Touch-and-go—"

"That is him, and no mistake!"

"Humm," Boo Boo says, scowling. "I cannot see what good your personal papers can do a desperado."

"These papers," the Senator says, hushyfied, "happen to be letters I have received from a very dear lady friend. Now, don't misunderstand me, Boo Boo. There ain't nothing incriminating in them, for I am a man of highest integrity who watches his p's and q's utmostly close.

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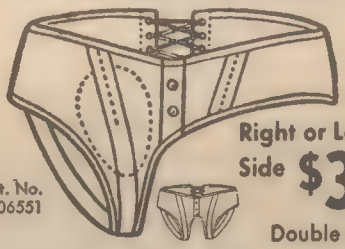

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But for sentimental reason, I wish to recover them."

"That," Boo Boo says, doubtful, "is hardly nothing to get so excited about."

"The honest truth is," Senator Blout says, blushing rosy, "my lady friend is no little romantic-minded. A number of things she has writ to me, I would not care to be made public before the election. For example, she addresses me as 'Dearest Dumpling,' 'My Sweet Patootie,' and various other endearing names that might cause the voters to snicker. Also, she has a habit of signing her letters with 'Your loving Tootsie-wootsie' and 'Sweetie-pie Sugar,' and so on."

"You see, Boo Boo," Judge Jackson says, tapping his cane worriedly, "old man Bundy and his *Polecat News* is fighting us tooth and toe-nail, as usual. He would be no little happy to pay even a desperado like Touch-and-go Graham for them letters to print in his newspaper."

"Yes, indeed!" Mayor Malone says. "Bundy ain't got no more ethics than a skunk."

"Therefore, Boo Boo," Judge Jackson continues grimly, "if you wish our political support at the coming election, you will lay all else aside and get busy recovering said letters."

"Never fear, gents," Boo Boo says, his three chins quivering fearful, "I, Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce, always gets his man. Therefore, leave me add—"

But by then, the three politicos are going elsewhere.

"Deputy," Boo Boo says, wearily, "that is the trouble with being on the same political team with a former dog-catcher who has turned into a senator. You never know."

That is when the male quartet stops singing, and Forty-rod, Nail-head and Bing-bong come outside.

"There won't be a dry eye left in the lodge hall tomorrow night after we sing our song," Bing-bong says happily.

"Come, friend Nail-head," Forty-rod says, waving his shoe box, "leave us go select a pair of shoes to fit my feet."

"Deputy," Boo Boo says, "leave us go to Stinky Joe's beanery and eat our dinner. A man with as much on his mind as I have cannot function properly on a empty stomach, and no mistake."

On the way to Stinky Joe's restaurant, who should we meet but Miss Mona Moon, the actress, and her mamma, Mrs. Moon, who is the director of "Poor Little Rich Baby."

"Ladies," Boo Boo says, bowing gallant, "it is a no little unexpected pleasure to meet two such lovely creatures walking upon the street of our fair city."

Miss Mona smiles dazzling, causing Boo Boo to swallow wrong and choke. Mrs. Moon smiles also, but being somewhat long-faced, with a skinny nose, there is no danger of choking from her smile.

"Mr. Bounce," she says, she having a husky voice, "I hope you have learned your lines by now. Only two more times to rehearse the play, you know."

BOO BOO says, "Madam, I must confess that numerous official duties have hindered my progress as a learner. But never fear, with my good deputy ready to prompt me at all times, I will be Johnny-on-the-spot, and no mistake."

"Boo Boo," Miss Mona says, rolling her big blue eyes at him, "is such a natural born actor, Mamma, that he will be the hit of the show, lines or no lines."

After that, Boo Boo cannot hardly get his hat back on his bald head.

By the time we have et, it is time to go to the lodge hall. This we do. Soon the entire cast is there, including Mrs. VanUplift with her baby granddaughter. Also, Chin-nick Chancy, the barber, who is the villain, a hard-hearted gent with a black mustache, who hates helpless babies and pretty young widows, like Miss Mona is in the play, and her brave hero, Boo Boo, who has come to save her and the baby from being tossed out of their home into a cold blizzard at midnight.

"Places, everyone," Mrs. Moon says, businesslike.

That is when the baby gets a good look

at Boo Boo, screws up her face and begins to bawl ear-splitting.

Smiling friendly, Boo Boo takes a firm grip on the Teddy bear and waddles to where the baby is at in a crib on the stage.

"Annabelle," he says, "see what I have brung you."

The baby stops crying instantaneous, grabs the Teddy bear and smiles up at Boo Boo pleasant.

"Why, dear Mr. Bounce," Mrs. Van-Uplift trills happily, "for a bachelor, you are a very wise man concerning a baby's nature."

Blushing somewhat rosy, Boo Boo smiles modest.

After this, I take my place behind a window in the scenery where I can prompt Boo Boo without being seen. Everything goes as good as usual until we come to the third and last act. This is where Boo Boo discovers a box with papers in it which prove that the baby is the heir to a fortune left by her dear dead uncle, thus foiling Chin-nick, who is about to toss Miss Mona and Annabelle out into the cold, cold night.

Boo Boo comes rushing onto the stage, empty-handed and waving his arms. "Hold, you dastardly—"

"—coward!" I prompt.

"—coward!" Boo Boo roars.

"Just a moment, Mr. Bounce," Mrs. Moon says. "You forgot the box with the papers in it."

"Deputy," Boo Boo says furious, "why didn't you remind me?"

"Here is the box," Mrs. Moon says, handing him a shoe box. "I have put some old letters in it, which will be the papers that prove the baby is a rich heir instead of a pauper."

Boo Boo take the box and rushes onto the stage again.

"Hold, you—"

"—dastardly coward!" I help him.

"—dastardly coward! I have found—"

"—the papers—"

"—the papers you have hid!" He takes the lid off the box and waves the bundle of papers under Chin-nick's skinny nose.

[*Turn page*]

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"Now, my poor dear future wife's baby is—"

"—no longer—"

"—no longer a pauper! She is worth a million smackeroos—"

"—dollars." I correct.

"—dollars. So get out, sir, before I throw you out!"

Chin-nick, filled with rage and frustration, slinks out. Then Boo Boo walks over to the crib and smiles down at Annabelle, who for the first time smiles instead of yelling her head off.

"From now on—" I prompt.

"From now on." Boo Boo says, "the three of us will get married and live happy ever after, and no mistake."

Then he takes Miss Mona in his arms, and the curtain comes down with a thump, not giving me a chance to straighten out his last speech like it is supposed to be.

WE RUN through this third act a number of times before Mrs. Moon is satisfied. By then, the day is over, and it is time for one and all to go home.

Boo Boo and I step out into the evening shadows.

"Hopewell," he says, smiling, "practicing a play ain't the least tiring for such as I, a natural born actor."

"Boo Boo," I say, worried, "I hope you have not forgot about Touch-and-go Graham and the Senator's love letters. He, Judge Jackson and Mayor Mince-meat Malone wasn't fooling when they said what they'd do if you did not recover said billy-doos."

"I forgot all about them letters," he says, looking sad.

I am on my way home somewhat sad myself, and do not think nothing more of Grandma Grinder's kitten until she hobbles across the street and says, "Hopewell, did you find a lovely burial spot for my little Sally Sue?"

Not being one to disappoint a dear old lady, I nod yes and say, "A nice grassy spot beneath a tall, lone pine where at numerous flowers bloom in the spring."

Smiling, she hobbles back homeward.

The next morning at breakfast, my wife says, "Hopewell, it is a good thing today ends this play business, for I am fed up having you around and about those two fancy females from the East. Especially that blond hussy, Miss Mona, and her big blue eyes. If I thought that you—"

Not waiting to hear more, I put on my hat and depart.

As usual, I open the jail office door quiet, but there is no need for quiet this morning, for Senator Loud-mouth Blout is walking up and down the room rapid, his gold watch chain jingling, his face redder than a rising moon on a foggy night. Boo Boo is cringing in his swivel chair, his eyes bugging, his three chins quivering fearful.

"So you ain't found hide nor hair of Touch-and-go Graham and my letters!" the Senator roars. "In fact, you ain't stirred one single step outside of Polecat to look for that blackmailing coyote! Boo Boo, you are nothing more nor less than a big fat lazy chair-warmer and a disgrace to the party!"

"Excuse me, Senator," I murmur, "but Boo Boo has a great deal on his mind."

"You keep out of this, Hopewell!" the Senator yells. "All right, Boo Boo, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"I," Boo Boo gurgles, "was setting here, merely awaiting the arrival of my deputy, so's we could ride together about the country, searching thoroughly for Touch-and-go Graham."

"Well," Senator Blout says, "your deputy has arrived. On your feet, Boo Boo, and get busy!"

No little shaken, Boo Boo staggers to his feet.

"Deputy," he says hoarsely, "kindly trot out to the barn and saddle our trusty mounts, whilst I look for my sixgun and a few-odd extra shells. Although I have said it before, leave me say it again—I, Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce, always gets my man."

But the Senator has walked out, slamming the door so hard my hat flies off.

"If he hadn't of took me by surprise

this morning," Boo Boo mumbled, "I would of told him to go jump into Skunk Creek and cool off." He picks up the play book and sticks it into a pocket. "Come, Deputy, leave us ride from town and find a quiet nook where at I can peruse my lines undisturbed."

"You mean you are not going to look for Touch-and-go?"

"Hopewell," he says, grim, "don't you realize that tonight I am to appear before a theatrical audience with only one more short rehearsal left? A man cannot be a star actor when he is running around and about, searching for a desperado."

"In that case," I say, picking up the shoe box, "I will ride into Dead Man's Canyon and bury Sally Sue."

AGAIN he stops me with a waggle of one fat thumb.

"Grandma's kitten will have to wait till after our last rehearsal this afternoon, Deputy. Kindly put that box down, and leave us saddle and ride."

We go to the barn, saddle our horses, and I boost Boo Boo astride his buckskin. Looking grim and dangerous for such as Touch-and-go Graham and all other outlaws, we ride from Polecat. Coming to a lonely and shady spot on the right bank of Skunk Creek, we dismount and set down comfortable.

"Now, Hopewell," Boo Boo says, "leave us rehearse."

This we do until near noon, when Boo Boo says, "Enough, Deputy. A actor such as I cannot concentrate when the inward man craves food. Leave us ride back to Polecat and eat a hearty dinner to fortify ourselves for the afternoon rehearsal."

Upon reaching Polecat, we dismount in front of Stinky Joe's and go in and eat.

Since our last rehearsal is to be short and end early that afternoon, I take along Grandma's kitten in the shoe box, figuring I will go to the canyon immediately after the curtain falls and bury Sally Sue. Arriving at the lodge hall, I take my place behind the window. Even after all our study that morning, Boo Boo cannot think

[*Turn page*]

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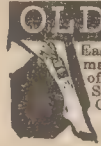

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of half what he is to say, thus keeping me busy prompting him.

Just as the curtain goes down on the last act, who should come rushing behind stage but old Canyon Cronk, his eyes sticking out of his whiskery face like doorknobs.

"Hey, Boo Boo!" he yells. "Where'n tarnation is—Oh, there you are. I seen more strange lights and a ghost!—Say, how come you didn't come out to investigate, Boo Boo?"

"At the moment, I am too busy to explain," Boo Boo says. "But never fear, I ain't forgot my promise."

With that, he hurries away, leaving old Canyon Cronk talking to himself.

"Reckon I might as well go back home," he mumbles, "and do my own investigating. Danged, fat, lazy, no-good!"

"Canyon," I say, having had a sudden inspiration, "if you are going home, perhaps you would do poor old Grandma Grinder a favor?"

I tell him about the dead kitten, and he being a close friend of the Grinders in years gone by, agrees to bury Sally Sue in a cozy spot in Dead Man's Canyon on his way home. Thanking him muchly, I find the shoe box and give it to him. Still talking to himself, he mounts his burro and rides homeward, saving me a wearisome journey, besides digging a hole.

That night, there is a great crowd at the lodge hall to see "Poor Little Rich Baby," in which baby Annabelle, Miss Mona, Chin-nick and Boo Boo are in, even if it does cost one dollar per each ticket.

At eight right on the nose, the curtain goes up on the first act, which is not so bad, considering Boo Boo comes in wrong twice, and Chin-nick loses his black mustache. The second act passes without undue trouble. Then it is time for the quartet to sing, and we cannot find Nail-head Nutter no place about.

"He had to go over to his store," Bing-bong Beemer says. "Chicky-choo Crump wanted to buy a pair of shoes, and Nail-head ain't one to miss a sale. But he ought to be back in a minute."

That is when Nail-head comes rushing in back-stage, his face red and furious.

"Boo Boo," he yells, "I demand action! Arrest Forty-rod Frye immediate, the low-down swindler! He pretended the first pair of shoes I sold him was too small, so I let him trade for a larger pair without looking in the box he brung back. Tonight when I went to sell Chicky-choo them smaller shoes, I opened the box, and there was nothing inside but a very dead cat!"

I FEEL somewhat faint and glance at Boo Boo, who is staring at me no little glittery. But before anyone can speak, Miss Mona hurries up and says, "Gentlemen, please! Stop arguing, and sing your song."

"I won't sing with no shoe thief!" Nail-head says, stubborn.

"Do something, please, Boo Boo," Miss Mona says, tearful.

Only after Boo Boo promises to throw Forty-rod in jail as soon as the song is sung will Nail-head go out on the stage with Forty-rod. As for Forty-rod, being slightly foggy with a few bracers he has drunk to help him face the audience unafraid, he does not quite understand what is going to happen to him, but wants only to sing.

While they are singing, Boo Boo gives me a hateful look.

"You and your dead kitten!" he hisses. "If it was not so close to election time, me not wanting to cause undue comments concerning the sheriff's office, I would lock you up along with Forty-rod. What became of them shoes, Hopewell?"

"I must of give them to Canyon Cronk to bury," I say, "not realizing that Forty-rod mixed up the boxes when he was practicing singing in the jail office."

"This is a pretty howdy-do!" Boo Boo says wrathful. "Now, in order to pacify Nail-head, who has many relatives of voting age, I must lock a innocent man up in my jail!"

At that moment, the quartet comes off

stage, and Nail-head says, gritty, "Boo Boo, do your duty!"

Realizing that he is about to be arrested and thrown in jail, Forty-rod objects and wants to fight everybody in sight. Boo Boo, Nail-head and Bing-bong grab him and carry him off.

Knowing that the third act cannot start till Boo Boo has returned, I rush around to find Mrs. Moon to tell her, but cannot find her no place about back stage. So I explain to Miss Mona, who then steps out and tells the audience there will be a slight delay before the third act.

Presently she comes to me and says, "Hopewell, run over to the jail and hurry Boo Boo up. It shouldn't take him the rest of the night to lock up a second tenor."

I rush outside and go to the jail. Just as I reach the door, Boo Boo comes out, puffing violent.

"Hurry up, Boo Boo," I say. "The audience is growing restless, and a few have been yelling for their money back."

"Leave them yell," Boo Boo wheezes. "When a sheriff sees a light in a bank, he has to do his duty!"

"A light?" I say, confused.

"While we was dragging Forty-rod along the street, we saw a light in old man Lilly's bank. Naturally, we stopped to investigate. Believe it or not, Hopewell, we found none other than Touch-and-go Graham in there, twirling the dial to the safe. So we grabbed him and locked him up!"

"Did you get the Senator's letters from him."

"Of course not. I didn't want to give no secrets away in front of them singers. But leave us get along and start the third act."

We rush into the lodge hall, and the third act begins. All goes well until Boo Boo comes rushing in with the box of valuable papers.

"Hold, you dastardly coward!" he bellows. "I have found the papers that prove—"

He rips open the box and holds up a

[Turn page]

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pair of shoes under Chin-nick's nose.

Instantaneous, there is a roar of laughter from the audience. Utmostly confused, Boo Boo cannot think what to do next. He turns to look at Miss Mona for help, but she is nowhere to be seen. Then Chin-nick staggers off, leaving poor Boo Boo alone with baby Annabella.

ANNABELLA takes one look at Boo Boo and begins to scream. Mrs. VanUplift rushes out and shakes a fist at Boo Boo for making her granddaughter cry. After that, I am the only one with any presence of mind. I pull down the curtain with gusto.

There follows great pandemonium, for a large number of Polecatters want their money back, because the play was not finished proper. Then it is discovered that not only is Mrs. Moon missing, but also Miss Mona, along with all the cash taken in for tickets. It is then that Boo Boo and I, too exhausted to do anything further, sneak away, me going home, he going to the jail office.

It is the next morning when Senator Blout, Mayor Mince-meat Malone and Judge Jackson come to the jail to help Boo Boo make Touch-and-go Graham tell what he has did with the Senator's love letters.

"I will tell you one thing," Touch-and-go says, sneerful. "I am none other than Mrs. Moon herself when wearing a wig and a dress, both of which I discarded before you found me in the bank. As for Miss Mona, she is my wife, and coming here to put on a play was merely our way of looking your town over for a bank vault to open and suckers to fleece.

"Now, my wife being smarter than you rubes all put together, has hid out, you will never guess where, with both the letters and the ticket money. And if you gents wish them letters to be kept out of the newspapers, you had better accidentally leave my cell door unlocked."

Laughing gloating, Touch-and-go points a finger at Boo Boo. "Just to show you how dumb you are, Sheriff, you had them letters in your hands a dozen times. They were the letters in that shoe box you used in the play. Ha, ha! I couldn't of found a safer place to hide them, could I? And the reason we had you in the play was to keep you busy so's you couldn't—"

That is when the light breaks upon me no little brilliant.

"The shoes!" I cry. "The dead kitten! It can't be no other! What I mean is, I switched boxes on purpose, sending the letters with Canyon Cronk to be buried in Dead Man's Canyon where they would be safe from this dastardly outlaw."

"Deputy," Senator Blout shouts, shaking my hand, "leave me say—"

"This ain't no time for idle talk, Senator," Judge Jackson cuts in. "Leave us go recover the letters."

This we do, finding Canyon Cronk, who takes us to a very pleasant spot where at he has buried the shoe box, thinking he is burying Grandma Grinder's kitten.

No sooner do we dig up the letters than the Senator sets fire to them.

"Boo Boo," Canyon Cronk pipes up, "I investigated that ghost myself, and what do you know! It wasn't a ghost a-tall. It was that pretty blond gal you hugged on the stage of the lodge hall yesterday."

WE WAIT to hear no more, but ride to the old cabin. There we find Miss Mona cooking over a oil stove, while awaiting the arrival of her husband, Touch-and-go Graham.

Late that same afternoon while Boo Boo and I are setting in the jail office, resting up from our worries, he opens one eye and gives me a faint, weary smile.

"Hopewell," he says, "before you take this five-dollar bonus I am about to give you and go home for supper, leave me be a actor for the last time in my life and quote a line from a great play. 'All's well that ends well, and no mistake!' "

Saying nothing, I tuck the fiver deep into a vest pocket and go home, thinking it is not so bad, after all, to be the deputy for such a fine actor and politician as Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce. ● ● ●

THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 6)

fires, like the .22 caliber cartridge of today.

The Sharps .40-90 introduced the bottle-neck cartridge, so designed to put a big load of powder in back of a small caliber bullet. It was good up to 500 yards, but was noisy as a cannon and the 90 grains of black powder emitted a black cloud. It preceded the .45-70 Springfield that was effective at the tremendous range of 1000 yards.

The metallic cartridge wasn't invented overnight. It was a gradual development. Sharps introduced a linen cartridge which was thrust into the breech and the base cut off when the breech was closed, thus exposing the powder to the spurt of fire from the nipple percussion cap. It was a faulty device. The breech-clipped Sharps cartridge sometimes backfired powder particles into the rifleman's face and eyes, so did not find favor as a military weapon.

Springfield tried to better the linen cartridge by coming out with a paper one. Civil War soldiers were directed to bite off the breech end as they loaded it. My old grandpappy told me that the bad taste of black powder led him to taking up the tobacco-chewing habit.

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So it went—Kentucky rifle, Spencer, Henry, Winchester, Sharps, Springfield. Flintlock, cap-and-ball, muzzleloader and finally the repeater, semi-automatic and tommy gun. Also there was the transition from black powder to semi-smokeless to high-power cordite. The guns of the American frontier made us a nation of riflemen.

The sixgun was for close, quick work under the spur of desperate urgency and was almost never used at ranges beyond 50 or 60 yards—just about shotgun range.

This was the glamor gun of all time and still is, I suppose. Except for that very latest thing, the invisible death ray or space gun, junior model. Only a plaything, yes, but who knows what tomorrow will bring.

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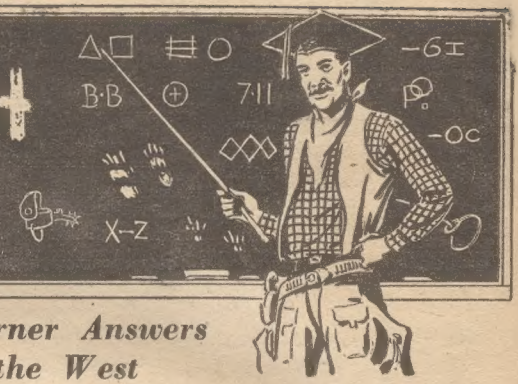

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—From what materials did western Indians make their war paint, how did they apply it, and what were some favorite colors?—H. DeW. P. (Mass.).

A.—Usually from various colored earths or stone crushed to a powder, mixed with grease or water and put on with fingers, a paddle or a primitive brush made from yucca, oak-sprout or other fiber. Few if any Indians used hair brushes. Favorite colors were red, blue, green, yellow, white and black, the last made from powdered charcoal. Clay reddened by oxide of iron was the commonest source of red. Earth or rock bearing various compounds of copper furnished greens and blues. Yellow minerals used frequently bore vanadium or even uranium. Some greenish hues were made from the dried scum from stagnant pools. Most war paint was "medicine," supposed to have supernatural power to protect the wearer in battle. It might also be designed to scare the enemy or to indicate a brave's war honors. Victorious warriors often painted themselves all over with charcoal, signifying that the "fire of war" was out. Lime white was and still is used by Pueblo Indians in many of their dance ceremonials.

Q.—I read somewhere that former Vice-President Jack Garner and a companion killed a white (albino) buck last winter near Uvalde, Texas. What breed of deer would it be in that area?—Nimrod (Pa.).

A.—White-tail, which is a branch of the Virginia red deer family. Texas also has some mule deer, but the white-tails are most numerous.

Q.—Where and when is the Snake River stampede rodeo held?—R. G. (Fla.).

A.—Way up yonder at Nampa, Idaho, July 14 to 18.

Q.—Is it true that Bing Crosby owns a company that makes cowboy boots?—K. A. J. (Ind.).

A.—Bing is (or was) chairman of the board of a well known boot company of Wichita Falls, Texas, but I don't know how much of it he owns.

Q.—Which is the right word for the leather case attached to a saddle, in which cowboys carry a rifle: holster, scabbard, or boots?—H. McC. (N.Y.).

A.—Around my section of the west we mostly call it a scabbard, though some cowpokes do call it a boot. Holster, however, means the scabbard for a sixshooter, pistol or other short gun.

Q.—Where is the Red River referred to in "The Cowboy's Love Song," also sometimes called "Red River Valley"?—Bessie (Calif.).

A.—There are a good many Red Rivers in the west, and it might be any of them. According to the best information I have, however, this is the Red River that heads in the Texas Panhandle, runs east into Oklahoma, then successively forms the boundary between Oklahoma and Texas and between Texas and Louisiana, and finally joins the Mississippi in Louisiana. Its upper half was all early day cattle country. But so was a lot of the country bordering the Red River of the North up in the Dakotas. I have also heard oldtimers claim that the song originated in northeastern New Mexico, where what is now known as the Canadian River was once also called Red River. If any reader of *Texas Rangers* knows for sure where this sweetest of really oldtime cowboy ballads originated, I'll be glad to back out and let him have the corral to tell us.

—S. Omar Barker

AMAZING OFFER TO READERS OF THIS MAGAZINE

—Continued from Other Side

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[illegible] ridin' after them [illegible] a sign," the cowboy [illegible] his partner, John Curry.

Sudde[illegible] stopped in their tracks. There, [illegible] keep slopes of Devil's Canyon, were the [illegible] Curry had sworn [illegible] on[illegible] A voice broke the silence [illegible] are, Curry! Ride [illegible] be feelin' some h[illegible]

"I ain't aimin' [illegible] ed. You get some straight answers! [illegible] The only answer were two [illegible] six-shooters, a spurt of fire, and . . .

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